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IMPOSTOR.

Alan St. Aubyn

A FAIR IMPOSTOR

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A Story of Eymoor

BY

ALAN ST AUBYN

Author of

'A Proctor's Wooing'

'A Tragic Honeymoon'

'To Step Aside is Human,' etc.

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# A Fair Impostor

## CHAPTER I

### STOKE EDITH

'Next came the moor-land,  
The moor-land, the moor-land—  
Next came the moor-land,  
It stretched for many a mile.'

SPRING begins late on Exmoor—on the 'Old Forest' pure and simple, not the sunny slopes and deep-wooded combes that run down to the sea—and autumn sets in early.

It is grey and misty on the hill tops for six months in the year, and for the other six it is windy and rainy, with now and then a splendid exception. There are days when the roof of mist that has hung for weeks over the moor lifts, and the dense white wall of fog melts away, and the horizon widens, and the colour of the heavens above is blue, and the grass on the hills is green, and the encircling arm of the sea is seen glittering below like a sea of glass in the sunshine.

Stoke Edith, a moorland village perched at the head of one of the deep-wooded combes that intersect the purple slopes of Exmoor, enjoyed these special privileges of climate. In its sheltered position, with the hills rising above it, sheltering it from the south and the west, it did



not get much sun at any time in the year. For some months in winter it did not get any; but it made up for it in wind and rain and mist, and when there was a driving sleet coming in from the channel, or a wild north-easter tearing across the moor, it got the full benefit of it.

No one could understand why the village had been perched in that desolate spot. Perhaps it would be more accurate to say why a church had been planted there. The church was at least two centuries older than the village; the village had grown up around it.

It stood on the windy hill, in the midst of a bare rolling waste of moorland, an ugly grey stone building with no pretensions to architecture; and a neglected graveyard rose up the steep hillside behind it. The low moss-grown wall that had once separated the yard from the surrounding moor had crumbled away in places, and the heather and the whortleberry had climbed over it and claimed it for their own. It was hard to say where the churchyard left off and the moor began.

The wild open moorland that rose above Stoke Edith was dreary enough all the year round. The rolling slopes and wide plains of purple and grey were barren and bare, a treeless waste, the haunt of the bittern and the red deer. There were no tors to break the dreary monotony of the landscape, and save in some sheltered combe, no whin bushes or gorse, only wide stretches of rank grass and heather and bracken as far as the eye could reach.

The village of Stoke Edith lay in a sheltered position in a dip of the hills. The village consisted of a long, straggling street; most of the houses were built of dull grey stone like the church, or with thick cob walls, deeply thatched to stand the weather; and they were inhabited by labouring folk who worked on the farms in the valley below.

It was an unpicturesque spot, but with a certain rugged

beauty of its own. All around it lay the dreary moor, barren uplands exposed to scorching sun and drenching rain, and fierce blasts of wind that came driving in from the sea. It lay off the highway, so that few strangers ever found their way to Stoke. A cross road beyond the church led across the hills and joined the coach road to Barnstaple, three miles distant, and a lower road led down to the shore. A steep, precipitous path cut in the side of the combe, a villainous road at any time, but in spring and autumn, when the moorland streams were swollen with heavy rains, a roaring torrent. No one could understand why the path through the combe had been cut. It had been cut ages ago, when smuggling was rife among the dwellers on Exmoor, when Stoke Edith was a village of smugglers. The sea was handy, and there was little fear of detection. Perhaps the path had been cut for their convenience.

It was seldom used now. There is no smuggling done at the present day, everybody knows. It no longer pays; or people have grown more virtuous. However this may be, the road through Gallantry Combe was no longer used; it was choked with a tangle of briar, and the 'Hacketty path' was overgrown with grass and heather. The moor had claimed it for her own.

The rude sons of the soil devoted themselves to more legitimate pursuits; but fearsome stories were still rife of the old smuggling days. A smuggler, or pirate, or hill robber, they were not clear which, was buried at the cross road above the village; the paving stones that covered his last resting-place were still visible, and a blasted oak near which his gibbet had been set up still upraised a gaunt, threatening arm to the wild sky. Superstition still lingered among the hills, and no one would pass the uncanny spot after nightfall. It was rumoured that the poor gibbeted wretch was restless; that no stake, driven however deeply through his body, could keep him

down, could prevent his taking an evening walk across the moor when the moon was low.

The countryside was alive with legends of Black Willy. They were only legends. No one had actually met him on his midnight rounds. The villagers talked of him with hushed voices when they gathered round the ingle nook, and recounted ghostly tales of panting pack-horses, and a phantom horde of smugglers who might be heard urging on their laden beasts with fearsome oaths, while decent folk were trembling in their beds. They had not been heard for some years past now; or people had ceased to listen for them. The coastguard had relaxed their vigilance; excise officers no longer wasted their time in spying about the lonely moorland roads. They had withdrawn themselves from Stoke Edith, when their occupation was gone.

The village was eight miles from the nearest town, but the eight miles that led up Winniford Hill, and across the Chains to Stoke Edith, in the sleets and snows and rains and mists peculiar to that favoured locality, everybody allowed were the worst eight miles in the county.

The Rectory adjoined the church; a gate from the Rectory garden led into the yard. The house, like the church, was built of grey stone, and, like it, was exposed to the elements on all sides. When the wind blew at Stoke it blew unmistakably, and the rain when it fell hit hard. The stunted firs and the gaunt, ragged thorns stretching their bare limbs upward to the angry sky all sloped one way, as if cowering from the winds that came tearing up the combe from the sea.

Windwhistle was the significant local name for the crossway on the moor that lay beyond the church and the rectory gate, and it fitly described the tumult that raged round the house in stormy weather.

The house was a bare, cheerless stone building, more resembling a farmhouse than a rectory. It had been

built low, and the windows were deeply set in the wall, and a starved hedge of thorn divided it from the road. The place had a forlorn, neglected look. The slates that had fallen from the roof lay buried beneath growths of grass and nettle on the path ; the walls were mottled with lichen, and moss was growing on the roof. Some of the window shutters had fallen away from their hinges, and the woodwork was cracking with exposure and want of paint. No repairs had been done to the place for years. The present Rector had held the living over forty years, and little or nothing had been done to it in his time. There had never been any money to spare for repairs ; or, for the matter of that, for anything else. When the living fell in, the Ecclesiastical Commissioners would bring in a fine bill for dilapidations, and—there would be no one left to pay it but an orphan girl with a library of musty old books and a few sticks of furniture for her dowry.

The Reverend Michael Carmichael had come to the living some forty years ago, and he had brought his bride with him. She had left him, after a few years' isolation on this dreary wild, with a little motherless lad.

He had brought up the child according to his lights ; loving him passionately, denying him nothing, and spoiling him according to the most approved fashion. When the boy grew up and disappointed him, he was unreasonable enough to blame Providence. After a stormy university career, Frank Carmichael left Oxford without a degree. His college debts nearly ruined his father. They were not paid off yet. A portion of his income was still mortgaged to an Oxford money-lender, though Frank had been dead to him for over eighteen years. Father and son had quarrelled soon after that Oxford episode, and Frank had gone abroad. He showed his gratitude for the love and care that had been bestowed upon him in the usual way. From the day he quitted the paternal

threshold until the time our story opens, nothing had been heard of him.

During those eighteen years a little baby sister, half-sister, had been born and grown to womanhood. The Rector, tired of his lonely life, had married his house-keeper, a rosy-cheeked dairymaid, and Celia Carmichael was the offspring of the marriage. It was rumoured that father and son had both been aspirants for the dairymaid's hand ; and that, yielding to the persuasions of her friends, she had accepted the father. It was from this unhappy state of things the quarrels had arisen, and Frank Carmichael had been banished from his home.

Poor Martha had not long enjoyed her distinction as the Rector's wife. She had died when Celia was three years old, and Mr Carmichael had to bring up this child of his age as he had brought up twenty years ago the child of his youth. He thanked heaven every day of his life that it was a girl. Girls, he was wont to declare, were easier to manage than boys, much easier—but he did not know. He had got to find out. At seventy, or thereabouts, things are found out slowly ; they do not rush upon the mind.

Celia Carmichael had grown up as the flowers grow up, fed by the air and sunshine and dew. She had not been overburdened with education. She had had the run of the Rector's library ever since she could read, and she had a box full of yellow backs, romances and novels hidden away upstairs in the attic. They had belonged to her half-brother Frank. They had been packed off up there out of sight when he had gone away, and Celia, when turning over some lumber one day, unearthed them.

She did not tell anybody of her find ; she read them—she devoured them—in secret, and she built up all sorts of romances of her own out of them. She could not have gone on living in that lonely place without

something for her young fancy to feast upon. A girl is only a girl—she will be an old woman by-and-by. If she has not a lover of her own, she is never tired of hearing about other girls' lovers.

It was Celia's fault that she had not had a lover; a sturdy yeoman who farmed the best land in the Combe was always hanging about Windwhistle for a sight of her bright eyes. But the Rector's daughter had no mind for an uncouth yeoman. She looked higher. She remembered she was a Carmichael. She forgot all about the dairymaid her father had lifted, for so brief a time, out of her humble sphere. She remembered only that she was a Carmichael.

The Rector had no patience with his daughter's folly. He had no ambitions himself. He was a weary, disappointed man; at seventy he was past making plans. When he died, Celia would be unprovided for. He would have welcomed with joy any honest farmer who sought her for his wife. It would be better for her to marry a farmer than to be thrown on the world with nothing but the dilapidations for her dowry. She would only be going back to her proper sphere. She had no right to look higher.

But Celia thought otherwise.

She was more a Carmichael than she was a Lake. Her peasant mother had given her her dairymaid charms of roses and cream, her full lips and rounded chin. It was rounded now, but it might grow double by-and-by, like her old grandmother's, Nance Lake up at Wytchanger; it might amplify, fold over fold, as the years went by, and her pretty red lips might grow heavy and hard. Beyond this, and her dark hair, of true Stoke Edith darkness, and her splendid constitution, which she had inherited from her peasant forefathers, Celia was a Carmichael.

She had the grey blue eyes and the short high nose of

the Carmichaels, and the slight upward curl of her upper lip, that gained her the reputation of being proud and scornful among the dwellers in the Combe. People forgot her mother was a dairymaid when Celia shot fierce darts of scorn at them beneath her dark lashes, and curled her beautiful, Juno-like lips; she might have been a princess in disguise for the airs she gave herself. More than once, when her yeoman lover had been on the eve of declaring his passion, she had stopped him in her scornful way, and he had not found courage to approach the subject again.

‘Highly tighty!’ old Janet exclaimed when she heard how her young mistress had sent her lover away—Janet had acted as housekeeper at the rectory ever since Celia was born—‘bless the child, what does she expect? Does she think a Prince ’ll come courting to Stoke?’—she pronounced it ‘Stock.’

The Combe had heard somehow that Nathaniel Snow had been rejected by Celia—a man of substance who could have bought the Rector up a dozen times over, and paid that long bill for the dilapidations without feeling it. Old Janet had heard it among the rest, and was loud in her lamentation at the girl’s folly. Celia’s mother had been a youthful companion of Janet’s; they had been playmates together; they had served the same master when they first went out to service, old Nat Snow at Letcombe, the father of Celia’s lover. If anyone had a right to speak, to advise the wilful girl for her good, it was old Janet.

Celia tossed her head at the old woman’s rebuke, and laughed softly. ‘I daresay a Prince ’ll come some day,’ she said. ‘I don’t see why he shouldn’t come to Stoke. I hope you’ll put on a clean apron when he comes, Janet, and pull down your sleeves; you couldn’t wait upon a Prince with your sleeves tucked up.’

Janet went away in a huff, and did not offer any more

advice. Celia had touched her in a tender spot. It was one of her unconventional ways to serve her master's meals with her sleeves rolled up. She had served them so long in this fashion without remark, that when Celia returned from school—with the thin veneer of polish that a couple of years at a cheap boarding-school had given her—and ventured to remonstrate, the old woman had taken offence. She had threatened to leave if Celia referred to the subject again—and she had rolled up her sleeves an inch higher.



## CHAPTER II

### MISS CARMICHAEL'S WOOER

'Ah, western winds and waters mild !'

It really seemed as if Celia's jesting words were prophetic. A Princess, if not a Prince, was really coming to Stoke.

A tenant had been found at last for Gallantry Bower ; and the tenant was a Princess. Gallantry Bower, a fine old country mansion overlooking the Severn Sea, some three miles down the Combe that bore its name, had been empty almost as long as Celia could remember. When the late owner died, the place had been shut up. He had lived a wild life and died in debt ; and his successor, unable to keep up the place, had shut it up and gone abroad. It had been to let so many years, but no one had been found willing to take it. There was nothing but its lovely situation and its romantic name to recommend it. Hidden away among pine woods, on the slope of a steep, fern-clad hill, with the sea breaking below, and shut out three months in the year from the sight and warmth of the sun, it was not a cheerful residence. It was difficult, too, of approach ; ten miles from the nearest railway station, about the worst ten miles that could be found in Devon. It was no wonder it had remained empty so long.

But now a Princess was coming. Perhaps she desired

solitude. There were all sorts of rumours rife in Stoke respecting the new tenant of Gallantry Bower. She was not an English Princess; she bore a foreign name—the Princess Tortona Bordone. It was rumoured that the lady was young and beautiful, and of immense wealth, and that she was bringing a retinue of servants with her. But report was silent about the Prince.

Even the Rector of Stoke, who did not take much interest in the concerns of his parish, began to speculate about his new parishioner. The Princess Bordone was a parishioner, though the Bower was three miles away. The owner of the place was the Squire of Stoke Edith, and owned all the land about. There was a good deal of land—the bare, bleak hills above, and the wooded valleys sloping down to the sea, and the foreshore between the Foreland and Gallantry. Though the acreage was of considerable extent, the rental was small. So much of the land was unproductive—barren uplands yielding scanty harvest in return for daily toil, and pine woods, and coppice, and brake-clad hills, with steep, precipitous cliffs seaward, and a foreshore that cost more to keep in repair than the rights were worth.

It was a wild, pebbly foreshore, washed by the western tides. A landing-stage had been built here years ago, in the late Squire's time, for the convenience of reaching a yacht he kept in the shelter of the bay, but it had long since fallen to decay, and the yacht had gone to pieces on the rocks.

The cliffs rose steep and precipitous for miles along the coast, but a road had been cut in the cliff that led from the house down to the shore. In the late owner's time this path had been guarded by iron gates, which long ago had rusted off their hinges.

It was this private path to the sea that the people of Stoke Edith had used while the house was tenantless; it had superseded the old steep Hacketty way through

the Combe. It was reached from the village above by a gently sloping road winding through the pine woods, and passing in front of the house itself. There had been no one to stop the people from using it; they had used it so long they had begun to consider it a right.

The Rector was thinking of this when he talked the matter over with his churchwarden.

'What will they do, Nat, about the road through the Parks? I suppose it'll be closed now? The Princess would hardly like people passing through her grounds,' he remarked, when Celia's suitor, who was churchwarden of the parish, happened to look in on the day of the arrival of the new tenant of the Bower. Celia had come into the room while they were talking. She did not join in the conversation; she sat on the wide window seat, looking out of the open lattice. She had brought a book in her hand, but she was not reading. She was dying to hear about the newcomers. She would have gone out of the room when she saw Nat Snow with her father if curiosity had not kept her back. She hated the big, burly, red-faced yeoman; the sight of his black whiskers, and his great purple throat, always made her sick, she declared; but she was dying to hear about the Prince.

'Ye-es,' he answered slowly, 'it's bound to be closed; but I don't know that Stoke 'll be any the worse off. There are some hereabouts who are too fond of moonlighting in Gallantry woods. It's just as well that the road should be shut up before anything happens.'

He looked over at the girl on the window seat as he spoke, and the Rector frowned. He saw the look, and he mistook the meaning. He knew exactly what that allusion to moonlighting in Gallantry woods meant, and the nature of the evil that might be averted. The Stoke Edith men who were likely to suffer if their nocturnal rambles were interrupted were the kinsmen

of the girl in the window seat. His most troublesome parishioners were the members of his late wife's family. He could not ignore them. Everybody in the place knew that Tom Lake, the poaching vagabond who sat drinking all day in the village inn, and had more than once seen the inside of the county gaol, was Celia Carmichael's first cousin.

But the churchwarden was not thinking of Tom Lake the poacher; he was thinking of the girl herself. He was thinking deep down in his common-place heart that if Celia would look over his coarse face and his rough ways, he would spend his life in making her happy. He would keep her as a lady, and give her the best that money could buy.

To do him justice, he never once thought of her vagabond cousin. Nat Snow did not do himself justice in that mental summary of his demerits. His face was by no means coarse. It was reddened and tanned by sun and wind, and roughened by exposure to all sorts of weather, but it was a handsome face withal, wholesome and ruddy, with the strongly-marked features and dark hair and beard of the Stoke Edith folk—a well-set-up yeoman, with big broad shoulders and big muscular limbs—big everywhere; a handsome, brawny giant in the prime of splendid manhood. Perhaps this was why Celia hated him—he was so horribly big.

'I don't see why the Gallantry path should be shut up,' Celia said warmly from her window seat. 'How are we to get to the shore if it is shut up?'

'There's Hacketty way,' said the churchwarden, 'but I don't think it's quite the path for your tender feet, Miss Celia; we must see about having it cleared.'

'My feet are not particularly tender,' said Celia, shortly, and she turned her head away and looked at the spreading landscape outside the lattice.

'I hear,' said the parson, filling up a pewter cup from

a jug of ale on the table, and lifting it to his lips before he finished the sentence. He did not put it down again until it was empty; he could see when it was empty when he raised it to the light—the cup had a glass bottom; it was an old college cup. ‘I hear that the—ah—Princess is a Catholic, and that her household are all Catholics; she won’t have a Protestant about her.’

‘She a furriner, I suppose,’ said the other, following the parson’s example, and tossing off his pewter. He glanced at the girl in the window seat before he tossed it off; he made sure that she was looking the other way. ‘I’ve no faith in they furriners.’

‘She’s an Austrian, I believe,’ said the parson. ‘I looked out the name, Bordone. There’s a place called Turaga Bordone. I daresay it’s a little principality about half as big as one of our English counties. I don’t think the title of a foreign Princess counts for much. I’d rather Geoffrey Bluett came back to his own.’

‘I heard he was coming back if this foreign woman hadn’t made an offer for the place, that all arrangements were made. It was time he came back; the whole place is falling to pieces. He has been away a dozen years, I should say.’

‘He has not been away eleven years, not till August; I remember his going away quite well,’ said Celia from her window seat. She had been listening to the conversation, she had not lost one word of it; and she had heard the clinking of the pewters. She had the sharp ears and the keen wits of the Stoke Edith folk, with all her Carmichael haughtiness.

‘You have a good memory, Miss Celia. If I’m not making too bold, I’d like to know how you fix the date for August,’ said the churchwarden, emboldened by that cup of amber ale.

‘Oh, that’s easy enough to fix. Geoffrey Bluett gave

me a dog when he went away—his own little pet terrier ; and a week after—I only had it a week—it was killed. A horrid farm waggon went over it and killed it.'

A look of conscious guilt overspread the churchwarden's florid face. It was his waggon that had killed Celia's puppy.

'I'm very sorry,' he stammered. After the lapse of nearly a dozen years, he was still sorry for that sad day's work.

'Yes, of course you were sorry ! but that didn't bring poor Ponto back. I don't know what use it is people being sorry when a thing's done. I'm never sorry. I was sorry then ; I remember I cried for a week. I buried him in the churchyard, and put a stone over him. I scratched the date on the stone.'

'In the churchyard?' said the parson. He did not speak in a very shocked voice.

'Well, just outside ; you know where, papa, where the stones have fallen down. I'm sure I don't know whether it's in the yard or not.'

'And I'm sure I don't know !' said the parson, with a laugh, and he refilled his pewter. He did not add that he did not care ; but the churchwarden coughed, and the girl looked out of the window.

'Well, say it's eleven years,' said the farmer, breaking an awkward silence ; 'that's a pretty long time to let a place go. To my certain knowledge there's not been a thing done to it all the time, not a gate hung or a fence mended. It's been going to pieces year after year. I hear this—er—Princess has taken it on a lease, a repairing lease, and that an army of workpeople are coming down to put it in order. She'll have her work cut out when she once begins.'

'Serve her right ! What does she want coming down here upsetting everybody ? A papist, too ! I can't think what can have brought her here !' Celia said warmly.

She had caught that remark about the Squire coming back.

'The hunting, I'm told; she's brought down a dozen horses with her, all thoroughbreds. There has never been anything seen like them in these parts, from all accounts.'

'The hunting! Why doesn't she hunt in her own country?'

'Because she's a wise woman, my girl. She knows, or she's been told, there's no hunting in the world like stag hunting on Exmoor,' the Rector said thickly. 'We'll show her ladyship some sport; a three-hour forest run, and a kill in the Oare Water 'll find out what her thoroughbreds are made of. I'd back my Damsel against 'em all! I mind the time—'

But Celia did not stay to hear. Her father would go maundering on when he once got on his favourite topic; he would not know when to stop. He had twice filled that pewter, and his hand was straying over to the jug, that had just been refilled. Celia got up from the window seat with a swift glance of disgust at the table where the men were drinking, and passed out of the room.

She was sick and angry and impatient. She could not bear to see the old man drinking there; the spectacle filled her with shame and loathing. And she hated Nat Snow for encouraging him. He was his churchwarden; he ought to have kept him back; he ought not to sit there drinking with him.

Nat came out presently. He did not stay long with the parson when she had gone away. He left the old man to his cups, and he came out into the garden, where Celia was walking bareheaded among her roses. They were a poor sort of roses; old-fashioned monthlies and common cabbage roses. A hardy 'glory' sprawled in a forlorn, neglected fashion over the garden wall,

and some little yellow banksias climbed among the honeysuckle on the porch.

Celia looked up quickly when he came out, and knitted her brows; she did not attempt to run away from him. She held her head high and straightened herself as he came towards her. Something in his face told her what was coming.

'Celia,' he said timidly, 'Miss Celia'—he was blushing beneath his tan, and a warm light had come into his dark eyes, and his voice was not quite steady—'I have been waiting for a chance to speak to you—for—for some time past.'

Celia opened her grey blue eyes a trifle wider. They were like deep wells of light at times, when her thoughts were far away, when she was building one of her airy castles in Spain; but to-day they were as cold as steel.

'I wanted to ask you something,' he went on desperately—it was no use beating about the bush—'I wanted to ask you if you thought you could ever love me—if you would marry me—'

'Marry you!'

The girl's eyes flashed, and her lip curled; she could not keep the scorn out of her voice. The silly fellow had chosen an ill time for pressing his suit. He was reeking still with the odour of that rank tobacco that he had been smoking; and the fumes of the ale seemed to hang about him. Celia caught a whiff of that pungent aroma above the scent of the roses.

'I love you, I have always loved you, Celia,' he went on, not heeding her scornful words. 'I—I don't expect you to care for me all at once; but perhaps—after a time you will get to like me just a little—to love me—'

'I shall never love you,' the girl said, turning upon him fiercely. 'I cannot think what put such a thing in your head!'

'You don't know, dear,' he said eagerly, 'you don't



know. I am willing to wait—to give you time—if you will only let me hope. I don't want to hurry you—'

'If you wait a hundred years, I should only give you the same answer!' she said.

His cheek paled, but his courage did not fail him, or his patience. He had heard a good deal of the ways of women, the way of a maid with a man who loved her, and he was not dismayed.

'I know I am not good enough for you, Miss Celia. I am only a rough farmer, but you can make me what you like. There is nothing I would not do to win you. I would give up the farm, if you like, and go away from Stoke. I wouldn't ask you to be a farmer's wife. You should live like a lady, and have your own horses and carriage; there is nothing I would not do to please you.'

He was dreadfully in earnest; his vehemence almost frightened her. She could not doubt, from the tone of his voice, from the passion in his eyes, that he meant what he said, that he was ready to do all this—to make any sacrifice to win her.

It was this conviction that made her hesitate.

'I—I am sorry,' she said, with her eyes drooping, and her colour coming and going; 'I am dreadfully sorry, but I can never love you—as—as you deserve to be loved, Mr Snow. My feelings are never, never likely to change!'

'Never! Then I may not hope—' he faltered, the fine ruddy colour dropping out of his cheeks.

She did not answer him. Her father had followed them out into the garden, his face was flushed and his white hair was flying in the wind—there was always a wind blowing over the hills, or up from the sea—and his gait was unsteady. He had got a paper in his hand, which he was waving as he came towards them.

'Here, Nat—Nat!' he was calling in a thick voice that was as unsteady as his gait, 'I've a-changed my

mind ; I'll sign the paper ; I must have the money at any price. Hang it ! what do I care about the timber ? I *must* have the money.'

The ale he had been drinking had made his speech thick, and his lips were loose and working, and his eyes bleared and dim.

The churchwarden hurried forward to meet him. He did not wait for Celia's answer ; he went forward quickly, and took the old man by the arm and led him back to the house.

'All right, parson, all right,' he said, in a voice that was almost rough, that was angry and ashamed ; 'there was no hurry about the paper.'

Celia looked after them, as they went back between the rose bushes, with her dark brows contracted, and the lines about her heavy Stoke Edith mouth deepened.

'As if I could ever love him !' she said scornfully.

## CHAPTER III

### THE RECTOR OF STOKE

WHEN her lover—her rejected lover—had left the house, Celia went back to the room where her father had been drinking.

He was still at his cups, though the pewter tankards had been pushed aside, and some glasses had taken their place. There was a smell of something stronger than beer in the room, and a stone jar containing spirit was on the floor beside the table. Celia saw the jar directly she went into the room ; she knew it of old. She took it up quickly and carried it away. She trod softly, for the old man was dozing in his chair. Before she had reached the other end of the room, he woke up and saw her carrying it off, and called to her, with an oath, to bring it back.

‘I’m going to put it away,’ she said defiantly. ‘You have had quite enough ; I’m going to lock it up here. You can have the key if you like.’

She locked the jar in a cupboard in the wall, and threw the key on the table. It was safe to give him the key ; in his state he could not have crossed the room to open that cupboard to save his life.

‘Hang you !’ he muttered, and then his head fell on his breast, and he relapsed into a drunken doze.

The girl stood looking down upon him, half in scorn.

half in pity. She had not much filial affection for the old man. Her love was half pity, and she had a young girl's impatience of his weakness. She could make no allowance. She did not know how hard his life had been, living year after year in this solitude, without any outlet for hope or ambition. She did not know what it was to lose hope; to give up the struggle before the race was half run, and sink into a soured, disappointed, hopeless old age. She did not think of all this; she would not have understood if she had thought of it. What should youth know of failure and disappointment?

The Reverend Michael Carmichael had come to Stoke when he was a young man, full of youthful hopes and ambitions. A scholar of his college, who had taken a First-class, and had come near—very near—winning a Fellowship. Stoke was a college living. When Carmichael accepted it, he had taken it as a stepping-stone to higher things—to a bishopric, perhaps. He was ambitious enough in those days to aspire to anything. The higher things did not come. He waited in vain for preferment; promotion passed him by. Hidden away in the obscurity of that remote moorland parish, the world seemed to have forgotten him. While he was still chafing under disappointment and neglect, the sorrow of his life fell upon him. He lost his wife. It did not seem to him when she was gone that it mattered much what happened. Success or failure would be much the same if she were not there. Success would not be success without her; it would be more bitter than failure.

It was this unreasoning grief, this dark cloud that obscured his life, that was the deathblow of his ambitions; this, and later on, the trouble about his son. Disappointment and failure seemed to follow him. He must have already become reckless to marry a country wench who had been his servant. From that

miserable day, though poor Martha had done her best to keep him straight, the downhill way had been constant. There had been no looking back. He had let himself go. The girl who was the offspring of the ill-assorted marriage was scarcely a daughter to him. Her presence in the house did not soothe or soften him; and she had no power to keep him from following the bent of his nature, to keep him from sinking lower.

He had not taken any trouble with Celia's education. She had gone to the dame school in the place with the rest of the village children, and when she grew older, too old for such elementary instruction, she had gone for a couple of years to a cheap boarding-school at Barnstaple.

She'd had 'her bringing up,' as Janet expressed it, 'to Barnstaple.'

The 'bringing up,' if it had no other effect on Celia, had opened her eyes. When she came back after those two years spent at Barnstaple, she saw things in a different light. She was no longer a child, and she had seen something, a little, of the world—the world as it may be seen in North Devon. She no longer looked on with indifference when her father sat long over his cups, when he wandered in his speech, and was unsteady in his gait. The sight of that stone jar in the cupboard, of the great jugs of beer that Janet was bringing in from the cellar at all times of the day, and the fumes of tobacco and alcohol that greeted her when she went into the room where her father sat drinking, were inexpressibly hateful to her. She had begun to find out that her life was unlike the lives of other girls of her station. The joys and excitements and social amenities that other girls enjoyed had never been hers. She did not miss them till she came back from that Barnstaple school. Her life there had been full of animation and movement, and for society she had

enjoyed the lively companionship of a dozen girls her own age.

When she came back to Stoke Edith, this was all changed. She had no one to talk to all day but old Janet. When her father was not away on the moors hunting, he was sitting over his cups. He hunted four, sometimes five days in the week; whether it were stag or fox, it was much the same to him, so long as he was tearing away over his beloved moor at the tail of the hounds.

The chase had become the all-absorbing passion of the old man's life. He lived in the saddle. Wherever there was a meet of hounds, whether across the Chains in the heart of the old forest, or far away on the other side of the moor amid the Combes of Lynn and Horner, the Rector of Stoke was always a familiar figure.

The vilest weather, nor the farthest distance to cover, did not interfere with him.

His thin, wiry frame was hardened by exposure to endurance which no fatigue could subdue; and his ardour for the chase, which neither age nor infirmity seemed to cool or temper, enabled him to face hardships that would have daunted younger men. He did not know what weariness was when he was in the saddle, and the hounds were about him.

He desired nothing better in life. When the time came when he would no longer be able to sit a horse, the end, he used to say, would come swift and sudden. There would be no slow decay, no day of debility and stagnation awaiting him. He would die as he had lived, in the saddle. Perhaps it was for this reason he had long since ceased to pray for deliverance from sudden death.

The Church's formula for deliverance from this doubtful ill had dropped out of use at Stoke. Other forms had dropped out of use too. Stoke was too far off, and

the roads far too bad, for any Episcopal interference, and the Rector of Stoke did pretty much as he liked.

With no occupation from week's end to week's end but to visit a worn-out labourer, or listen to the complaints of a farmer's wife, if he had not taken to hunting he might have done worse. At seventy-two he would hardly have been the hale man he was but for his out-door life.

But if Parson Carmichael cut a fine figure in the saddle, he was in sorry plight when overtaken in his cups. He was in sorry plight when Celia came in from the garden and found him dozing in his chair. She could not look at him without anger and disgust.

There were writing materials and loose papers scattered on the table among the glasses and pewter cups, but the paper he had brought out into the garden, the paper he was willing to sign, was not among them. Perhaps the churchwarden had taken it away.

Celia asked him about it the next morning at breakfast. He was always down betimes, however late he sat up over his cups. Even in those July days before the hunting season began, he still kept up his habit of early rising.

'What paper was that you were going to sign last night, papa?' she asked him.

'Paper?' he said, pausing with the cup of tea she had just poured out for him midway to his lips; 'what paper do you mean?'

'The paper you brought out into the garden. Nat Snow was going away, and you called him back; you told him you had changed your mind; you were going to sign it.'

'Paper?' he repeated, striving to recall the events of the previous night, and failing. 'I did not sign any paper that I know of. If I did, Nat took it away with him.'

'He must have taken it away. I came in when he was gone, and it was not on the table. You—you would not surely sign a paper, papa, without knowing what it was?'

'Hanged if I can remember what it was!' he said, pushing aside the cup of tea that he had been about to drink. 'Here, Janet, bring me some ale! I am not in the humour for slops this morning.'

There was a bye-meet of the staghounds over at Simonsbath, and when the Rector had finished his ale, his hunting-pony, Damsel, was brought round, and he rode away. He did not return until the sun was sloping to the west; and Celia had so much to occupy her mind during the rest of the day that she did not give another thought to the paper that the churchwarden had taken away.

A girl from the village came up to help Janet in her work; it was washing day, and while the girl was spreading out the linen on the bushes, Celia was feeding her pigeons in the yard. The girl nodded as she came towards her with her basket of clothes—she did not drop a curtsy—and Celia nodded back. It was her cousin, Susan Lake, and until she went to the boarding-school at Barnstaple, she had been her chief companion. Since her return home with that new polish upon her, and with her eyes opened, the old early intimacy had not been resumed. The Rector's daughter was a young lady now, and Susan had fallen back into her own place. Celia had suddenly discovered that Susan's manners were uncouth, and that her speech was coarse and vulgar. She even went so far as to resent her addressing her as 'cousin.'

Susan had taken offence at this, and a coolness had sprung up between them. But to-day she forgot her pique. She was full of a great event that had happened to her. She was brimming over with her great news.



She wanted to plump her basket of clothes down in the middle of the yard where Celia was feeding her pigeons, but Janet had her eye upon her.

'Spread 'em on they privet bushes in the sun, maid. They'll get broke to shreds on they thorns!' the old woman called to her when she saw her preparing to spread the linen on a low thorn hedge near which Celia was standing.

The girl took up her basket unwillingly, and went through the gate into the garden beyond. When Celia had finished feeding her pigeons, she followed her. It was someone to talk to; it was better than talking to cats and dogs, and whistling to pigeons.

'This is about the last time I shall come up here o' washing days. Janet 'll have to look out for someone else to carry about her heavy baskets,' the girl said, as she proceeded to throw a sheet across the privet hedge.

There was nothing in the words, but there was something in her voice that made Celia pause in her walk; there was a quiver of excitement in it.

'What is it, Susan?' she asked, with languid interest. 'Are you going to be married?' She could not think of any other subject that would stir the pulses of a Stoke Edith girl.

Susan Lake laughed and reddened. She was a comely girl; to the taste of the Stoke Edith boors she was handsomer than the parson's daughter. She was made on larger lines, rounder and fuller in the figure. She had a round, fresh face, with a delightful sun-browned complexion, and coarse, dark hair, almost black, which she wore in a big, loose, untidy knot. Her colouring and hair were like Celia's, and the shape of her chin; they might have been taken for sisters. But while Celia inherited the high aristocratic nose of the Carmichaels, Susan's was broad and re-

*trousée*, and her eyes were black as sloes. It was a frank, sensual, good-natured face; perhaps the heavy, over-full lips, the wide, laughing mouth gave it that appearance of good-nature. There were capacities for passion in the face, a determination about the heavy mouth, that was one of the characteristics of the population of Stoke Edith.

Susan Lake wore a lilac cotton sunbonnet which flapped in the wind, and her skirts were tucked up, displaying a pair of shapely legs that would have made the Venus of Milo blush if she were given to blushing. Perhaps carrying a milk pail up and down those steep hillsides had had something to do with their strength and beauty.

'Who is it?' Celia asked with some animation, seeing the girl did not answer. 'Is it Luke Field?'

The girl laughed, and tossed her head.

'As if I should marry the likes of he!' she said scornfully.

'Joe Martin?' Celia suggested. She could not think of anyone else in the village that her cousin would be likely to marry, but a poaching, smuggling vagabond, and the new landlord of the village inn.

But she was not destined to have either of these undesirable relatives.

'It isn't marrying,' said Susan, facing round with her black eyes full of new importance; 'I'm going to service.'

'Going to service!'

Susan nodded.

'You'd never guess where,' she said.

'At—at Pinkery?' said Celia, accepting the challenge.

'You don't think I'd go there! I should never be able to sleep of nights for thinking of the ghost. They do say he walks still, and on windy nights he moans awful!'

'Pooh! it's nothing but the wind; as if a ghost with any spirit would go moaning around Pinkery Pool because

a girl wouldn't marry him!' Celia said scornfully. She was thinking of Nat Snow.

There was a romantic story connected with Pinkery Pool. A young farmer had drowned himself in it for love. It was years ago that his body was taken out of the pool, but he was still said to haunt the spot.

'If it isn't Pinkery, it must be Sweet Tree,' Celia said decidedly; 'you wouldn't be likely to go back to the Snows—after—'

'I'm not likely to go back there after the way I've been treated,' the girl said passionately, her face growing crimson with a sudden heat, and her heavy mouth hardening; 'if the old missus were to go down on her knees to me, I wouldn't go back!'

'I don't think she's likely to go down on her knees—or the master either,' Celia said drily.

'Don't be so sure about that,' said the girl, tossing her head.

Celia smiled. Nat Snow was not likely to go down on his knees to his mother's dairymaid. He didn't even go down on his knees when he asked Celia if she wouldn't, couldn't love him just a little. He was just as likely to go down on his knees to a girl as he was to throw himself into Pinkery Pond.

'There's nowhere else,' Celia said reflectively, 'unless you've got a place away, Susan.'

'You'd never guess where it was if you were to guess till Doomsday!'

'Is it hereabouts?'

'It isn't far off.'

'On the moor?'

'Not exactly.'

'Any other servants kept?'

'Heaps!'

'Heaps?'

‘You’d never guess, I tell ’ee, if you’d go on guessing for a year. It’s at the Bower.’

‘Gallantry Bower! Whatever will you do at the Bower, Susan?’ Celia said in some astonishment, as she surveyed the rough, untutored wench who was spreading out the wet clothes on the privet hedge.

‘Do? same as other folks, I suppose!’ Susan said, in an offended tone. ‘I be took on as dairymaid. I be took without a character. Her didn’t want no character with me, the housekeeper said, the looks of me was character enough;—an’ she give me double the wages I asked!’

## CHAPTER IV

### GALLANTRY BOWER

PARSON CARMICHAEL did not return from his gallop over Exmoor until the dusk was falling. There had been a forest run after all, and a stag had been killed in Badgeworthy Water. However long the run, he was never too tired to recount the events of the day when he got back to his own fireside, to kill the stag afresh over his tankard of ale and his spring chicken. Old Janet kept a special brood of spring chickens all the year round for her master's table. When he came back after a long day's hunting, he was sure to find his favourite dish awaiting him.

It was awaiting him when he came in on this breathless July evening. The windows of the low-ceilinged, old-fashioned dining-room at the rectory were small and deep, with heavy stone mullions and diamond leaded casements; they did not let in much light at any time in the day, a dim twilight at the best, but when the evening shadows fell, the inside of the room was wrapped in gloom, while the daylight still lingered outside.

There was a lamp on the long table where the meal was spread, but the rest of the room was in shadow. The walls were of dark panelled oak, and big oak beams supported the ceiling. In the gathering gloom there were

vague impressions of an old oak dresser, grotesquely carved, and blue pottery and gleaming silver cups. The cups were trophies of the Rector's old college days ; and the ancient dresser had belonged to his predecessors.

The Rector sat at the top of the long table, and Celia at the bottom, with a dreary expanse of white cloth, unrelieved by flowers or silver, between them. Janet did not exactly wait upon them, but she brought in the dishes, with her arms bare and her skirt tucked up. It was washing day, and she was in the middle of her ironing, but she had found time to brown the Rector's chicken to perfection.

'Susan Lake has been up here to-day, papa. She has got a place as dairymaid at the Bower,' Celia said from her end of the table. She had to speak rather loud for the old man to hear.

He looked up from his plate, and took a deep draught of ale. 'That reminds me,' he said, 'that I met the Princess Bordone out to-day. She was riding with the hounds; the secretary introduced me. He said she could only speak a few words of English, but she spoke as well as I could, and she shook hands.'

'Shook hands! I'm so glad. I was afraid, being a princess, she would be too proud to notice anybody. What kind of a woman is she, papa? Is she young and as handsome as people say?' Celia said eagerly.

'One question at a time, if you please. Yes; she is young—not more than twenty, I should think; and as to being handsome, I am no judge. I leave that to younger men. She has the finest pair of brown eyes I ever saw in a woman's head, and she rides as if she had been born in the saddle.'

Celia drew a deep breath.

'Oh!' she said; she could not find another word to say for quite a minute. When she recovered her breath, she made another inquiry.

‘Who was with her? Was she riding alone?’ Perhaps there was a Prince after all.

‘Her steward was riding with her; he seemed to know the country very well, but he rode off when I came up. And there was a groom behind with a second horse. She’s brought down the right kind of horses for Exmoor. Whoever bought them for her knew what he was about. There was a flea-bitten grey among them, the steward was riding it; that is about the best bit of horseflesh—’

But Celia was not listening; she did not care a button about the flea-bitten grey, she wanted to hear about the Princess—or the Prince. She had not quite given up hope.

‘Hasn’t she brought a suite with her, papa? I thought people of that kind always travelled with a suite.’

‘I didn’t see anything of a suite, only a big, surly fellow who called himself the steward, and the groom with the horses. She’s a widow, I hear, so the secretary told me—the widow of an Austrian General, and she has taken a place here for the hunting.’

‘It is very odd for a woman to come alone—to come so far for the sake of the hunting!’ Celia said scornfully. She had not much opinion of a woman who could give up the attractions of Vienna, London, Paris, and come down to these dreary moors for the sake of the hunting.

‘Not at all; it shows her sense. She will see the finest sport in the world on Exmoor, if we are only lucky enough to get a good season. I don’t know that she could have pitched on a better place than Gallantry, if it had been built for her. With a steam yacht she can come and go when she likes; she’s independent of roads—’

‘A steam yacht! Do you really mean, papa, that she came in a steam yacht?’

‘Yes ; you can see it lying off the point, if you get up on the hill. She came over from France in her yacht. The old landing-place, I hear, has been repaired ; there have been a dozen men at work at it, and the iron gates on the shore have been re-hung. The place is full of workpeople repairing the fences. She’s going to keep the people out of the grounds at any cost ; there are notices up everywhere, I’m told, warning trespassers off. She doesn’t look the sort of woman to be trifled with.’

The following morning Celia saw the wonders that were being done on the shore below Gallantry for herself. She could not sleep for thinking of the beautiful Princess and her steam yacht ; and the flea-bitten grey mixed himself up with her dreams.

She slipped away after breakfast and ran down the steep moorland path that led to the Gallantry covers. The path—it was only a bridle-path between the heather—led north and south ; north to the sea, and south to the deep heart of the old forest. It was worn and gravelly to the north, where it led down to the covers, but the grass was growing on the upward path, which did not seem to be much affected by the villagers of Stoke Edith. There was a reason for this ; the path had a bad reputation. It was said to be haunted. Black Willy’s ghost was supposed to ‘walk’ this particular bit of moorland. It was the road over which he used to drive his panting team in his old smuggling days, over which now he was reputed to drive his phantom troupe. It was on the way to Barnstaple, a short, direct cut across the hills, as wild and lonely a stretch of moorland as could be found on Exmoor. Beyond a shepherd’s cottage a mile above the village, there was not a human dwelling for miles—nothing but heather-clad slopes and shelving combes, with steep, precipitous sides, and the bare, dreary expanse of open moor. The



shepherd's cottage was not without its ghostly legend ; it had shared in the evil reputation of the place. An old man, who had lived in it years ago, had hanged himself from one of the beams in the kitchen. He had long been looked upon with suspicion as being connected with a smuggling gang, and, being warned that the police were on his track, he had hanged himself from fright. Perhaps, when too late, he repented of his hasty deed, and was unwilling to quit his lonely freehold. It was rumoured that he had never really quitted it, that he might be seen at nightfall pottering about his neglected garden.

However that might be, the cottage had fallen to decay, and for many years no one could be found willing to live in it. The Stoke Edith people were full of superstitions ; they had as firm a belief in witches and bogles as their forefathers.

Celia took the path to the north that led seaward. A thick copse of hazel and oak and birch rose above the road. The bank was steep where the road had been cut through it, and it preserved, or partly preserved, the plantation within from the depredations of the deer.

Above the hazel hedge a wire had been newly fixed—a cruel, barbed wire that was as obnoxious to man as beast ; but Celia did not attempt to climb the bank. She ran down the road. There was a gate, she remembered, lower down. When she reached the gate of the plantation, that used to swing on its hinges to let her pass, she found that it was padlocked. It was not much for Celia to climb the gate and vault lightly down on the other side ; she would have climbed it if it had been twice as high.

A moss-grown road ran through the wood beneath the dark shadow of the pines. She left the scorching sunshine on the open moor behind, and plunged into the semi-darkness of a forest of pines.

The road wound round the side of a hill, the gloom growing deeper the farther she advanced. She peered curiously between the tall forest of masts rising amidst the bracken, to see if any deer were sheltering near. She had no fear of the monarch of the woods, though she had heard stories of solitary pedestrians being attacked and having to fly before a herd of startled deer. Celia had lived in red deer land all her life, but no stag had come out of its way to molest her. She was much more afraid of Black Willy's bog'e than of all the horned deer on Exmoor.

It was close and sultry on that hot July day beneath the trees. With all her anxiety to see the steam yacht and the wonders of the shore, Celia soon relaxed her pace. She took off her broad-brimmed straw hat and swung it on her arm, and gathered a frond of fern by the way to fan herself. She had left the beaten path through the wood, and was wading between the tall bracken to cut off an elbow of the road, when she heard, or fancied she heard, the sound of voices near. She could not catch what they were saying, but she could distinguish a woman's voice, and the deeper tones of a man answering her. She stopped to listen. There was something in the tone of the man's voice that was familiar. She thought at first, for a moment, it was her father calling her back, but that was nonsense; she had left him in the stable with his horses. If he were not hunting, the Rector usually spent the morning in the stables, and Damsel had sprained a tendon yesterday; he would not be likely to ride her to-day.

The voice that Celia seemed to know was not far off, and she heard the beat, at the same moment, of a horse's hoofs on the mossy road. A high bank of fern hid the speakers from her sight, but she gathered from the sound that it was a lady who was riding, and a man was walking by her side.

‘Nothing could be better for the purpose. There is absolutely no risk—’ the man was saying as they passed.

She could not catch the woman’s answer. Her voice was low and rather sweet.

‘Do you think for a moment I would let you run any risk?’ he continued. The tone of his voice was manly and tender—Celia was sure it was tender, though she had had no experience in manly tones.

‘As if I would not run any risk for you!’ She caught the answer now. It was low no longer; it was vibrating with passion.

Celia did not stay to hear any more. She plunged into the sea of waving fern, her cheeks and her ears tingling.

She did not meet with any further interruption till she reached the Bower. Just above the house, where there was an opening in the wood, and she could look down upon the chimneys beneath, the road branched off into two paths. One led by a sweep round the hillside to the front of the house; the other sloped down to the shore, past the stables and outbuildings. It was by this lower path that the villagers of Stoke Edith had been accustomed to get down to the shore. They had used it so long during the lifetime of the late squire and while the house had been shut up. It did not interfere with anyone. It led past the back of the house and the stables to the cliff that overlooked the sea. There were steps cut in the cliff beneath, giving access to the shore. Celia had been down the steps hundreds of times without any let or hindrance, but she paused to-day where the paths diverged, and looked down on the scene beneath. She hesitated to go on. She did not know what made her hesitate. That encounter in the wood had disturbed her. Her nerves were still tingling, and the words she had caught—the words the woman had spoken with that vibration of passion in them, ‘As if I

would not run any risk for you!'—still lingered in her ears.

She did stop to ask what the risk was; she did not put the words she had caught together. They had stirred something within her own breast; they had set her heart beating, and they made her pause and hesitate at the meeting of the ways. From where she stood, in the opening between the trees, she could catch a glimpse of the sea beneath.

She could see the blue water of the bay, and hear the waves breaking on the pebbles beneath, and catch lovely glimpses of the coast; and far away on the horizon she could just see Lundy Island, a grey cloud rising out of the blue. Celia had seen all these things a hundred times before; she had not come three miles down the steep hillside only to get a whiff of the salt sea, and hear the waves breaking on the shore. Her journey had not been in vain; the steam yacht which had drawn her here, was lying at anchor in the bay. It was not very much to see. A trim pleasure yacht, with bare poles and a big, gaping funnel, from which a thin curl of black smoke was rising into the blue sky.

The yacht was painted white, and the white-and-gold funnel was so pale against the sky that, but for the curl of smoke darkening upward into the blue, it would not have been noticed.

There was a gay little pennant flying at the masthead, and while Celia stood watching, the line of smoke, curling upward, darkened, and the vessel began slowly to change its position. She would have stood there longer but she heard voices in the path above, which she had just quitted, and she ran quickly down the familiar road to the shore.

To reach the shore she had to pass the back of the house, where the servants' quarters were. In crossing

the paved yard, the first person she encountered was her kinswoman, Susan Lake.

'You here, Susan !' Celia exclaimed, in surprise. 'I did not know you were coming so soon.'

I only came this morning,' Susan explained. 'The housekeeper sent for me last night ; there's only a man cook here, and he doesn't know naught about the dairy, and the Princess wanted some clotted cream. She would have the cream scalded Somerset way, an' I was sent for in a hurry. I guess she'll not have long to wait for the right sort now.'

They were at the dairy door, and Susan pointed with pride to some pans of milk that were cooling, with a rich yellow head of cream upon them, that would be ready for skimming off in time for the Princess's mid-day meal.

'Do you like it here?' Celia asked carelessly. She fancied the girl spoke in a low, frightened voice, unlike herself.

'I dunno ; I haven't bin here long enough to tell. They're mostly men folk here—cooks and men-servants. I haven't caught sight of a woman since I come, only the housekeeper and the Princess's maid, and she's a furriner. The men does the women's work ; I suppose it's their foreign ways.'

'I was going down to the shore,' Celia said. She had not much interest in the domestic arrangements of the Princess Bordone's establishment. 'I sha'n't meet anybody—no one to stop me?'

'You mustn't go down to the shore without permission. The housekeeper warned me that the path to the shore was kept private for the Princess to walk in ; the servants are not allowed down there without permission. There's a gate at the end, and it's kept locked. They're mighty partickler here.'

'Then I must go back as I came, I suppose. I can't

think what they want to shut up the path for. It's been public as long as I can remember—'

Celia turned away impatiently. She had not come all this way to talk to Susan Lake.

'I'll come to the corner with you,' said the girl, casting a lingering look behind at the pans of yellow cream. 'There's nothing I can do here while they are cooling.'

She walked with Celia up the hill to the road above, where the paths met. She did not seem at her ease; she paused now and then, and listened, and once or twice Celia caught her looking back.

'What are you afraid of?' she asked. 'There are no ghosts here—in the daytime.'

'It isn't that,' the girl hastened to explain; 'but the servants are not allowed to walk in the grounds. The Princess is very particular about not being disturbed. I must not go beyond here.'

They had reached the corner of the road where the paths met, and while they spoke there was the sound of horses' hoofs near, coming down through the wood. Susan stepped quickly back behind the shelter of the hedge, and Celia involuntarily followed her example. She did not know why she wanted to shrink out of sight. She was not ashamed of being there. The road through the wood had been public until now; for all she had known when she started, it might be public still. But she shrank aside as if she had been detected in the act of wilful trespass. Perhaps she did not care to be seen with Susan Lake.

While they were still shrinking behind the hedge, the horse came in sight. A lady was riding, and a man was walking by her side.

'Hush!' the girl whispered, drawing Celia back into the shelter of the leaves, 'hush! it is the Princess!'

## CHAPTER V

### THE PRINCESS BORDONE

THE Princess Bordone passed so close to Celia, as she stood concealed in her leafy arbour, that had she put out her hand she could have touched her.

She passed near enough to have what she most desired—a good look at her.

The Princess Turaga Bordone was worth looking at. She looked like a princess in a fairy tale. She was dressed exactly like the beautiful princesses that Hans Andersen loved to write about, only, instead of a palfrey, she was riding a very well-groomed hunter.

In the place of a riding-habit she wore a flimsy, transparent white muslin skirt, and a bodice of Lincoln green, and a soft hat with wide brims and drooping white plumes. It was altogether an unusual equestrian attire, but the Princess was riding in her own grounds. Spectators were not supposed to be present.

The face beneath the wide-brimmed hat was as unusual as the dress. A beautiful, clear-cut face, pale, almost colourless—the healthy whiteness of a white rose, holding in its depths a hint of scarlet passion. Only women with hair of that warm, golden-red, that the old Venetian artists loved to paint, have that passionate white rose colouring. It never goes with blue eyes, or pale lashes, or flaxen locks. It is only seen with a gleam of

ruddy gold in the hair, a gleam of latent passion in the eyes.

The horse and its rider had passed down the path before Celia had seen half enough. She was so full of the Princess that she had no eyes for the man walking by her side. A big, broad-shouldered man, with a black moustache; she caught a glimpse of the moustache as he passed, but she had not seen his face.

'Her's a beauty, isn't her?' Susan said in her broad Exmoor dialect.

'She looks young—very young,' Celia answered, not committing herself to an opinion. She was not sure that she admired white-faced, red-headed women.

'Doesn't look older than we, not a day older,' the girl said under her breath, 'an' to think of her being married and left a widder!'

'How do you know she has been left a widow?' Celia said, turning upon her sharply.

'I dunno; I heard—maybe it's a mistake. Only there's nothing said about no prince,' Susan said dubiously.

'Who is the man who was with her?'

'Oh, he's the steward. He goes everywhere with her.'

'The steward!'

Celia could not help raising her voice as she spoke. She remembered the words she had overheard.

'Sh—h—h—!' the girl said, putting her finger to her lips, and looking round uneasily. 'I wish you wouldn't speak so loud; I shall get into trouble if I am caught here. One of the things I had to promise when I engaged was I'd have no followers.'

Celia laughed.

'Followers! I'm not a follower, goose!' she said scornfully. 'You need not fear getting into trouble on my account; I'm not likely to come here again.'

She turned away and walked quickly through the wood by the way she came. She did not look behind her



until she had got nearly to the top of the hill, when she stopped, and looked out once more over the sea. She could see the cliffs of Wales on the other side, and far-off on the horizon, hardly distinguishable from the sea and sky, the white line of the steam yacht she had come so far to see.

The Princess was not in it. It had steamed away without her. Perhaps it had been despatched for stores. It was much easier to reach the Bower by sea than by land.

Celia did not think any more of the steam yacht; her mind was too full of the woman she had met riding in the wood, and her attendant, and the words she had heard dropped. She made up her mind at once that there was some mystery connected with the new people at the Bower. There was some reason for the strict privacy that the Princess desired, for the shutting up the old way to the shore, for closing the paths through the woods. Celia was not certain that she had not lighted upon a romance. At eighteen one is always on the look-out for a romance. She built up all sorts of wild stories as she walked back over the moor. The steward was, no doubt, a prince in disguise. Perhaps the couple were runaways. He had carried her off, perhaps, and was hiding her here, under an assumed name, until the pursuit was over. Had he torn her from her home, or from her husband's arms? Was there a tragic side to the story? He had spoken of risk, and she had made that passionate protest that had stirred Celia's pulses. Look at it in whatever light she would, the scene in the pine woods took the colour of romance.

She made up her mind that she would not breathe a word of her suspicions, that she would keep her secret. She was sorry that she had told Janet where she was going. The old woman was so inquisitive she would have to invent a tale to satisfy her.

As ill luck would have it, when Celia reached the gate

of the plantation, and was in the act of springing over it, Nat Snow passed along the road. He was driving a flock of sheep—at least his collie was managing the flock, and his master was sauntering behind. If the truth must be told, he was thinking of Celia as he sauntered along the green, solitary road through the heather. He was asking himself whether she would change her mind, what her answer would have been if the parson had not come away from his cups and interrupted them.

A cry—he could not help a cry of surprise, of pleasure, escaping him when he saw Celia at the other side of the gate. He would not have to wonder long now ; he would set that question at rest.

He went forward to her assistance, and held out his strong arms to help her over. She could not refuse his help, though she would have given anything to draw back, to get over by herself as best she could.

It was one of those uncomfortable gates that slope inward, that are so difficult to climb from the inner side, that are much better taken at a running leap.

Celia could not very well take it at a leap ; her skirts got in her way. She had to submit to accept the help offered her, to cling to her lover's strong, brown hands, and, when she reached the top, to be lifted down in his strong arms.

She would have given anything to avoid the ignominy of being lifted down, but she had no choice. In her anger and haste to avoid his unwelcome assistance, she entangled her foot in her skirt, and would have fallen when she reached the top bar of the gate if he had not caught her in his arms.

She did not escape scot-free as it was ; in alighting suddenly on the other side, though his arms were around her, she twisted her foot. It was entirely his fault : if he had not come up inopportunately, she would have got over quite well alone.

'I hope you are not hurt,' he said, in a voice of concern. 'You should have let me lift you down; you should not have tried to jump.'

'Oh, it's nothing,' Celia said, with a fine attempt at unconcern. 'I should have got over all right, but my frock got in the way.'

She tried to walk on, to gather up herself, not to show any pain, but the wretched foot would not let her; she could do nothing but lean against the bank, and, strive as she would, the tears came smarting into her eyes.

'You are hurt,' he said, putting his arm round her.

'It's nothing, I tell you!' she said, almost fiercely. 'I will sit down a minute and rest. It will be all right directly. Please go on. I shall be all right presently.'

She sat down on the bank, white and trembling; she did not know what had come to her. He stood by her side, looking down upon her with great concern. He blamed his own awkwardness. If he had taken her in his arms, whether she would or not, he would have saved her in spite of herself. Perhaps she guessed what was passing in his mind.

'I wish you would go on,' Celia said fretfully. 'I shall get on all right by myself—if you will only go away.'

'I shall not go away until you are better,' he said.

'I am better now. You will lose all your sheep if you stay here. They are nearly out of sight now.'

Nat Snow laughed. He did not see that she was keeping her tears back, that she was very near breaking down. 'They are all right,' he said. 'Laddie will take them home safe enough. He knows his business without me.'

It really seemed as if the collie understood what he was required to do. At a turn of the road he looked back for one instant at his master, who shouted some instructions. The creature did not exactly nod, but he

gave a short bark and whisked his tail, and ran round the flock, and gathered them together and marched them off solemnly to their destination.

‘Good Laddie! good dog!’

Celia looked up and saw the flock in the distance. ‘I’m sure you ought not to stay here,’ she said petulantly. ‘The sheep want you more than I do.’

He did not answer her. He stood looking down at her flushed face and her beautiful dark hair, and the long, dark lashes that shaded her grey eyes. Her mouth was trembling, he saw, and there were tears on the dark lashes, and a tremor in her voice beneath her petulance. Her nerves were unstrung. Her morning’s adventure had stirred something within her she could not understand. Now she was out of the wood, she wanted to give vent to her feelings. She would have given anything to scream; a good cry would have been a relief.

He did not know this. Looking down upon her sitting there, helpless and weak, he wanted to comfort her; to have the right to comfort her and shield her from pain and trouble. He would never have a better moment for pressing his suit; she could not send him away if she would.

He sat down on the bank beside her, and took her hand. She did not draw it away; she was too weak to make any struggle.

‘You did not give me an answer the other day,’ he said, bending over her. ‘Will you give me it now, dear. Will you tell me if I may hope?’

There was something in his voice that reminded her of the voice of the man in the wood; there was a note in it in common. It brought back the strange thrill that she had felt, the flutter at her heart. She could not have spoken if she would; there was something fluttering in her throat that stopped her.

Finding she did not speak, he went on, speaking low,

and bending over her till he could feel her warm, panting breath that came by gasps on his cheek.

‘Darling,’ he said, ‘I would give all the world for your love. Do you love me a little—just a little, Celia?’

Still she did not answer him; the words would not come. She was not sure she heard him right; it was the voice of the man in the wood speaking.

‘Dearest,’ he murmured hoarsely, with his arm around her—his arm had stolen around her before she knew it—‘is it to be yes—yes?’

He had taken her silence for consent, and before she could collect herself, he held her in his arms and was kissing her lips.

She could not break away from him; he was crushing her in his strong arms, and his hot lips were on her cheek.

‘Oh! this is some mistake,’ she panted; ‘I—I did not mean—’

But he only held her closer.

‘It is no mistake,’ he said. ‘You are mine—mine now, Celia—nothing shall ever, ever come between us.’

When he released her she had not strength to gather herself from his arms; the struggle or the agitation had taken away all her strength. She could only break into a wild passion of tears, and sob on his breast. He held her to him, and let her hysterical weeping wear itself out. He could feel her heart beating against his, and her tears were wet on his cheek.

Even when she recovered, she could not speak to him. Something was choking in her throat that kept the words back, and there was a dreadful flutter at her heart. She let him lead her back with his arm around her. She could not have walked without his support, but she did not speak a word to him all the way. She could only ask herself blindly what it meant.

It was not until he had left her at the Rectory gate, and promised to come up in the evening to speak to her father, that Celia understood. She did not even then comprehend what had happened, what she had done. She was faint and sick with pain, and her brain was in a tumult, and there was a strange, dull feeling at her heart that she could not understand.

She crept painfully up the stairs to her room, and flung herself on her bed. She could cry now, and beat the pillow, and sob in her agony and shame.

That dreadful hand that had been clutching at her throat had relaxed its grasp when too late. She could complain now, and moan, and beat the air.

‘I hate him ! I hate him !’ she moaned, ‘and I have consented to be his wife ! He will see papa to-night, and he will tell him all—and I shall never be able to draw back—’

She tore the pillow in her agony and shame ; she could not think what had possessed her to let him kiss her, not to scream and struggle in his arms and tell him it was all a mistake. He had taken advantage of her weakness. The physical pain she was suffering, the tension of her nerves, the overpowering heat of that close wood, had all helped to bring about that fit of hysteria.

It had all been a hideous tangle. One thing only seemed clear—she must go through with it. It was too late to draw back.

‘I hate him !’ she moaned, with her face buried in the pillow ; ‘I hate him !—but I hate myself more !’

## CHAPTER VI

### THE RED DEER

CELIA CARMICHAEL's engagement was an accepted fact. It was talked of openly in the village. If there had been anyone in Stoke Edith to congratulate her she would have been duly congratulated, and kissed, and petted, and made much of, as engaged girls are wont to be when they have a large circle of admiring female friends and relatives.

But Celia had no friends and the only relatives she could boast of were an old grandmother, who had an evil reputation in the village, a poaching vagabond of a cousin, and Susan the pretty dairymaid at the Bower.

She did not get any congratulations from these, though they talked about the engagement pretty freely.

Tom Lake spoke of it over his cups in the taproom of the village inn. There was a long, outstanding feud between Tom the poacher and the well-to-do farmer whose flocks covered the neighbouring hills. There had been some sheep-lifting not so long ago, and Tom had been more than suspected; and when he spent six months in the seclusion of Barnstaple Gaol, the squire-farmer had something to do with his incarceration. But the feud went farther back. The Lakes had served the Snows for generations. Father and son, they had worked on Letcombe Farm so far back as the family history went; farther, no

doubt, for there were Lakes in the parish registers, and on the rudely carved stones in the churchyard, for more than a century; and there were no other masters for them to serve in those old days but the Snows.

The men had worked on the land, and the women-folk had served in the house or in the dairy, and through all those long years of service they had been hard-worked and ill-paid. A century of iron rule, of grinding toil and scant wages.

But the old days were over—over, but not forgotten. There were no Lakes working at Letcombe now. Susan had been sent away at a moment's notice, and Tom had left, with bracelets on his wrists, in company with two members of the county police. He had left without notice or warning—had been carried off willy or nilly—and when his term of imprisonment was over, he had not returned to his old employer.

Since that episode in his career he had been living on his wits—deer stealing, poaching, fern picking. It was hard to say in what way he picked up a living, but he generally had a few loose coins in his pocket to rattle.

He was rattling them as he sat on the settle in the tap-room of the Red Deer drinking deeply, and indulging in coarse jests about Celia Carmichael's engagement.

The labourers of Stoke had gathered in strength in the kitchen of the village inn. The house had recently changed hands. A new landlord presided over the taps and glasses in the old dingy bar, and it was to celebrate his incoming the party was assembled. It was open house to-night, and the cheerful host was entertaining an unusually large company.

The inn kitchen was a large, low room, with a black oak settle by the hearth. The fireplace was broad and deep, with seats in the wall on either side, and a fire of thorns was crackling between them.

The ingle nook was so arranged, with the wide



chimney abutting on the road, that those who happened to be sitting round it were concealed from the view of persons outside. A century or two ago this precaution was not unnecessary; it has its advantages even now. The windows that looked out into the village street were curtained with red cloth; they were deep mullioned windows, with oak benches beneath. When these were filled, very little could be seen from without of the interior of the room.

The place was so full of smoke now, that if anyone had been looking through the windows of the inn they would have seen very little for their pains. Joe Martin, the village wrestler, who boasted he could drink more than any other man in Stoke without feeling it, was emitting as much smoke from his great coarse lips as half-a-dozen other men put together. Running him pretty close was Tom Lake, who was the centre of a group of half-tipsy rustics. Tom had been drinking all the afternoon; he was more than half-drunk when the festivities of the evening began. He had passed the boasting and bragging stage, and had reached the reckless and defiant. He was not careful in his speech at any time, but when Tom was in his cups, his candour approached to recklessness. It was fortunate he was among friends. The confidence the company assembled round the ingle nook of the Red Deer had in each other begat ease and candour.

There was only one stranger present, the new host of the inn, and it was not to his advantage to tell tales. He would hear strange secrets whispered behind that black settle, and he would see strange sights in that dusky kitchen; and if he were a wise man, he would be deaf and blind to both.

He was not deaf to-night as he sat smoking and drinking among his guests. He drank as deep as the rest, but he did not fill his mug from the same tap; he filled it

from a jug that stood handy behind the bar. He might have filled it a dozen times from that jug and have been none the worse for it. He was a big, ungainly fellow, with a red beard and small, twinkling grey eyes. There was an expression of heavy clownish stupidity in his freckled face which his twinkling eyes belied. He was unmarried, and it was rumoured that he had money in the bank at Barnstaple, and that he was looking out for a wife. A girl's name had already been whispered among the gossips of Stoke Edith as the future mistress of the Red Deer. Celia Carmichael had not been wide of the mark when she asked Susan Lake if she were going to marry Luke Field.

If there had been anyone there to remark it, they would have noticed that the landlord of the Red Deer paid a good deal of attention to Tom. He had given him the seat of honour in the corner of the settle, and he filled his glass more often than the rest, and he listened to his conversation. He did not lose a word of it.

It was not an easy flow of conversation to follow. It was husky and intermittent, and it was garnished with a choice vocabulary of oaths.

'I tell 'ee no good 'll come of it,' he was saying, addressing the company in general; 'the Lakes are no mates for the Snows. They're like fire and water, they won't mix. Let 'em alone, an' they'll do very well apart, but look out if they come together.'

'Why shouldn't they come together?' said the landlord. 'Squire Snow seems a fairish sort; he's pretty warm by all accounts. I should think the parson's daughter might do worse.'

There was a murmur of assent from the company.

'Deed her might!' said a middle-aged labourer who sat on the other side of the hearth. 'I mind her mother when she was dairymaid at Letcombe scrubbing the milk pans at the pump, an' the old missus stannin' over her wi'

a stick, an' the gal's tears a-running down her cheeks. I can hear the whack, whack o' the stick as it fell on her shoulders now. She had nought on but a thin cotton gownd, an' it was broke right acrost when she got up, an' ran into house a-maist blind wi' tears an' pain. Her mother tooked her away after that, an' her went up to the parson's. Her was Mrs Carmichael before the year was over ; but the old missus was dead by that time. An' to think of poor Mattha's bairn takin' her place !'

'Ay, t'owld gal was dead by that time ; she didn't live long after she gie Mattie that beating. She'd got some-one to reckon wi' that she didn't count upon,' Tom said, with a drunken chuckle.

The men gathered round the hearth exchanged looks of intelligence.

'You mean Granny?' said one of the company.

Tom nodded.

'I didn't know she'd ha' cast her eye upon t'owld missus,' said the labourer who had first spoken, Job Restorick. He was the thatcher of the village, and when he was not employed in his calling he worked on the land ; did odd jobs for the farmers round. Nat Snow was no more to him than the other masters he served. 'I'm not surprised after what I saw. I was thatching the barn, an' her seemed to forget I was up there. If the gal hadn't a-got up an' run into house when she did, I should ha' interfered. If it had bin a man a-beating the wench I'd ha' knocked un down ; but an owld woman—'

'Well, her got her deserts, I reckon,' young Tom said, with a chuckle. 'I've heard tell her couldn't turn in bed without screamin'. Her was racked wi' pains in all her joints ; you could hear her groanin' outside the house. An' the night before her died, her screams were awful !'

The men round the fire looked grave, and a shepherd who sat near Tom on the settle edged away. It was not

the first death in the village where these symptoms had occurred.

‘That minds me of t’ young squire, Maister Nat’s father,’ said the shepherd gravely; ‘he died off suddint like, an’ was racked wi’ pains at the end that puzzled the doctors.’

‘There’s much that goes on in this place that puzzles the doctor—and the parson too, I’m thinkin’,’ said Joe Martin, the wrestler, with a laugh. His laugh was big, like himself, and seemed to shake the rafters of the old place. ‘An’ that’ll puzzle ’em more before we’ve done wi’ it.’ He put down his quart pot with a ring on the table, and the landlord filled it, and a look of intelligence passed between them.

‘Ay, ay!’ Tom hiccoughed, with a sly leer in the direction of the landlord. ‘We’ll puzzle ’em!’

‘What’s that you’re saying about—about being overlooked?’ the landlord asked in a lowered voice of the shepherd, who was his nearest neighbour.

The man looked round before he answered. Young Tom over in the corner of the settle was exchanging compliments with another rustic, and the shepherd during the commotion had shifted his seat.

‘T’owld woman up at Wytchanger has an evil eye,’ he explained. ‘Her have done a lot o’ mischief hereabouts. In the old days her’d a-been burnt for a witch.’

The landlord’s flabby face paled beneath his freckles.

‘His mother?’ he said, nodding in the direction of Tom.

‘His grandmother. Her used to work at Letcombe when her was a gal, an’ her husband worked on the farm all his life; an’ her gal Martha, an’ her son Joe—he that was killed in fallin’ from a rick. The owld woman took the childer when he died an’ brought ’em up.’

The children the shepherd spoke of were the youth on the settle and the girl Susan the landlord proposed to

marry. With this connection in view, he asked a further question about this amiable family.

‘How does the old woman live?’

The shepherd shook his head.

‘Her gathers yarbs,’ he said; ‘her can heal most anything wi’ her yarbs. My missus had a gatherin’ on her hand; it was cruel bad, an’ ran right up her arm, an’ old Nance cured it. When anything ails the childer she calls her in; it’s handier than sending twelve mile for a doctor. But she should never have nowt to do wi’ me. No witches wi’ their evil mutterins for me!’

The landlord laughed.

‘That’s an old wife’s tale,’ he said; ‘there are no witches now.’

‘Don’t be too sure about that,’ said the shepherd gravely. ‘I’ve a-sin what I’ve a-sin.’

‘What’s that yer sayin’ about witches?’ Tom demanded from his corner of the settle; he had overheard the landlord’s remark.

‘We were a-saying that there beant no witches now. We know too much in these days to be frightened by old wives’ tales,’ the landlord said promptly.

‘Don’t you be too sure about that,’ said young Tom, with drunken solemnity. ‘I could tell you some things that ‘ud make you sit up.’

A silence fell upon the assembled group after this speech of Tom’s. No one spoke for some seconds. The sudden silence was striking.

‘You don’t believe me, I suppose?’ Tom said, looking round defiantly. ‘Now, look you here, all of you; you mark my words. You see what comes of a Snow mating wi’ a Lake. If somethin’ uncommon curis don’t happen, my name’s not Tom!’

‘I didn’t know you was a prophet before, Tom; how long have you taken up that line?’ the wrestler asked, as he took a draught of beer from the pot beside him.

‘Tisn’t my words,’ said Tom, sulkily; ‘you needn’t go makin’ jokes about me.’

‘It’s t’owld woman?’ said the wrestler.

Tom nodded his head.

‘Her knows what her’s about,’ he muttered, looking round at the assembled company with an assumption of drunken importance. ‘I advise you not to go meddlin’ wi’ her.’

This was quite an unnecessary piece of advice.

## CHAPTER VII

### WYTCHANGER

THE road above Stoke Edith ran east and west. It was a steep bit of upland covered with heather, just now in its richest purple bloom, and dotted here and there with yellow gorse bushes.

The road to the west led across the moor to Simonsbath; the path to the east—it was little more than a sheep walk—lay green and solitary through the heather. It was an unfrequented path leading to an old earthen camp or barrow. A clump of stunted trees afforded some protection to a lonely shepherd's cottage that stood at the crossing of the roads—a low, stone-built hut, exposed to the weather on all sides. The shoulder of the hill above, which had once been clothed with a thick wood of firs, was known as Wytchanger. The name was an old one whether superstition had anything to do with it or not. Perhaps the neighbourhood of the old barrow had something to do with the dread with which the dwellers on the moor regarded this wild, lonely spot. A skeleton had been discovered there only a few years back by a man quarrying for stone. The stone wall of the cave in which it was immured had fallen out at a blow of the pickaxe, and a grisly figure had been discovered within.

It had been found bent forward in a sitting position, with an ancient urn beside it. The man who found the

skeleton carried away the cyst and sold it to the publican at the village inn for a pot of beer.

Rumours of the find reached Barnstaple, and the local policeman borrowed a pony and took a sack with him to fetch the remains. Notice was given to the coroner, and there was some talk about an inquest.

He took the remains back with him in the sack ; but the inquest was not held.

It would have been difficult to collect evidence respecting the tenant of an ancient British barrow who had died three thousand years ago.

The cave was filled up ; there was no more stone quarried from it, but the place had an ill name after. No shepherd could be found to live in the cottage, and moss grew over the footpath that led to it. When old Nance Lake lost her son, and had to give up her home in the village, she went to live at Wyitchanger. She had the place rent free, and she took in as much of the land around it as she could cultivate. There was no one to say her nay.

She took in a good deal, bit by bit, enclosing it with hurdles, and building up a hedge of dead grass and gorse.

Behind this clearing her grandson Tom had put up some rude shanties, and a stack of faggots stood near the door. The potato patch without he had not taken the trouble to enclose ; but within the hurdles and the hedge of gorse a garden flourished. Nance Lake had cabbages and peas earlier than her neighbours, though her garden was two hundred feet above theirs. Perhaps the gorse hedge had something to do with it.

Behind this hedge, too, she grew her herbs, the simples she was famed for through all the country round. She was careful of her herb border, and guarded it jealously from curious, prying eyes.

There did not seem much to hide ; a few roots of



gentian and featherfew and agrimony, and such like, and a clump of barm for a febrifuge.

A thin column of pale-blue smoke rose from the low blackened chimney of the hut into the still August air. The sky was so high above the moor that the smoke melted away before it reached the sun-flecked clouds above. There was a strong smell of burning peat about the place, and through the open doorway an old woman could be seen bending over a crock upon the hearth—a woman who had been powerful in her youth, tall and gaunt, a commanding figure still in spite of her stooping shoulders and her halting gait. Old Nance must have been a handsome woman in her time; her hair was still iron grey, and her black eyes were bright and eager as a bird's. She had the heavy mouth of the Stoke Edith people, but her lips were not loose; they were puckered into hard lines, and the lower lip projected. A bitter mouth and angry eyes, with an evil glitter in them, a chin covered with coarse bristles like a man's, and a pair of fierce bushy eyebrows, had won for Nance Lake the reputation of being a witch.

She was a hard, stubborn, silent old woman, who had a long standing quarrel with Providence, and was always brooding over the wrongs of the past. She had not suffered more than her neighbours, but she had magnified her misfortunes into personal injuries. She came of a lawless race of freebooters who had sailed years ago into Gallantry Cove. There were others in Stoke with the same hereditary taint—marauders by sea and land—and the old wild blood was always getting them into mischief.

The old woman looked up from the crock she was stirring on the hearth, and saw the parson's daughter opening the garden gate and coming down the path between the herb borders. An old lame hound came limping behind her. It did not attempt to enter the

hut; it looked up wistfully into the girl's face when it reached the door, and at a word from her it lay down on the threshold, with its old white nose between its paws.

'Is it thee, Cicely?' said the crone, without turning round from the hearth; 'I lookit for thee before. What news is this I hear of thee?'

Celia Carmichael's pink cheeks flushed a deeper pink at the old woman's words, and her mouth tightened. It had a way of tightening like the old woman's. It did not break into a smile at this reference to her engagement, and there was no shy gladness in her blue eyes as she answered her grandame's question. She answered defiantly, not shyly, as a young girl talks about her lover.

'About Nat Snow?' she said.

The old woman nodded.

'Who else should it be?' she said sharply. 'Is it true thou art promised to marry 'un?'

'I suppose so,' said the girl sullenly.

'Thy father hath made it up?'

'My father had nothing to do with it. I promised to marry him myself,' Celia said proudly.

'Thee art in love wi' him?'

'Love!' said the girl scornfully, stamping her foot, 'I did not say anything about love. I said I had promised to marry him.'

The old woman laughed—a dreadful cackle without any merriment in it. 'I might ha' known that; I might ha' known that a Lake wouldn't choose a Snow for its mate. There's a reason for it, forbye—'

'There's no reason,' said the girl shortly.

The old woman bent over the mess in the crock, and stirred it in silence. 'Weel, weel, thee knaws best,' she said presently, without looking up. 'In my time a gal wouldn't a-marriet a man wi'out a reason—a good reason. I mind the time when yer father—yer granfer, I should say—cam courtin'. It was love then—love, an' little

else. We marriet upon it, an' had children—seven of 'em—often not a bit or sup in the house, an' all they mouths to feed. God only knows how we did it—but we had love, an' that brought us through it.'

Her eyes had strayed away from the bubbling pot on the hearth, and they were soft and wistful. The memory of the old days had taken the hard glitter out of them.

'How old were you when you married, granny? Janet was saying that you were quite a girl, younger than I am.'

'Younger? ay, years younger. I dunno how old, I most forget; old enough to love an' to work. I could work then wi' the best. I mind nothing but work from year's end to year's end. Rough food an' scanty, an' long weary hours workin' in the fields, an' the childer at home a-gettin' along as they could. It was a hard time and a weary, God knows! I dunno how I should ha' got through it wi'out love. The feel of the little childer's arms about me when I got home o' nights tired to death, an' my man always ready wi' a good word, seemed to make things smooth when I was often most a-ready to give up.'

The hard old face softened, and Celia saw, or fancied she saw, a tear stealing down the brown wrinkled cheek.

'Did he live long? I don't remember ever hearing anything about grandfather,' the girl asked. She did not ask the question with any interest; she did not pretend to care for her humble ancestors.

'He died of a broken heart; he died wi' grief. When they brought his favourite laddie in i' the morn wi' a bullet through his breast, he give up, he made no stan'. One they sent over the sea, and one they killed in the woods, an' one died in jail—three as fine lads as any mither set eyes on. They were no idlers nor thieves; they did but hunt God's cattle on the hills, the deer that are free to gentle an' simple alike, that are no man's cattle to buy an' sell.'

'They were poachers?' Celia said, with a startled look on her face, and her eyes widening. This was the first she had heard of that long closed chapter of family history.

'Ay, call 'em poachers if you will; it was man's laws that made them poachers. Keeping them on starving wages, an' housing them worse than the beasts; an' counting the wild things on the hills of more worth than the lives of men. Filling the jails and the workhouses wi' men who were willing enough to work, and women and chilern nigh starvit to death.'

Celia shivered.

'Whosent them to jail?' she said. 'Did—' She did not finish the question, but the old woman understood her.

'Noa,' she said, 'noa, not he; but he druv them to it wi' starving wages. The best in the land for himsel', and the deil tak the rest! He wor a hard maister to serve; no hours were long enough for him, an' no work too hard, and never a penny over, only the bare wage, come winter or harvest. What could men do wi' the chilern a-cryin' by the hearth, an' no food in the pot, and the hinds rangin' free over the moor? It would have been shame for 'em to have held back; if they were here now, my brave lads, I wouldn't hold them back if I could!'

The old woman was trembling in her anger, and the hard glitter had come back to her eyes.

'And the girls?' Celia asked; 'what became of the girls?'

'Best not ask about the gals; they were likely enough wenches, every one of 'em. They couldn' live on the starving wage an' keep a decent gownd on their backs, an' they went away, small blame to 'em! Poor Mattha stayed behind—if she had had any spirit she'd ha' gone too. She marriet your father, chiel, she a gal o' eighteen, an' he an old man nigh upon sixty—an' her died fower years after. Her had better ha' gone wi' the rest!'

‘And you never heard of them after they went away?’

The old crone bent over the pot she was stirring, and her lips moved. She muttered something to herself, but Celia could not catch what she was saying, and she repeated the question.

‘I’ve a-told thee already not to ask about they!’ the old woman said, turning upon her fiercely. ‘They were likely wenches an’ well favoured; there were no brighter eyes on Exmoor than our Lil’s. The huntsmen, I mind, used to hang about the farm to get a sight o’ her; p’raps their praises turned her head. When the hunting was over, she moped an’ sickened, an’ hated the sight o’ the hills an’ the woods an’ the sea. She couldn’ abear her life any longer, an’ one morn, when it was still dark, her stole away. Her said nought to anyone; her made up her bundle an’ stole away. The bundle was found by the edge of the pool—Pinkery Pool, where the man drowned hisself for love. But Lil didn’t drown hersel’: her was seen ridin’ in a fine kerridge in Lunnon not long after, an’ when Bess heerd tell of it, her went away too. I never heerd whether her rode in a kerridge; I never heerd a word from either of ’em from that day to this.’

‘They may be living still,’ Celia said.

‘Not likely; they are dead long sin, dead and buried, an’ their shame’s buried wi’ ’em. They chose their own lot, a short life but a merry one.’

‘A merry one! How do you know it was a merry one?’

The old woman turned away and began stirring the contents of the pot; she would not answer any more questions.

When Celia went away, she left her still bending over the crock on the hearth; a dark steam with an evil odour was rising from it. She could not see the old

woman's face for the cloud of vapour that arose from the hearth, but she could hear her mumbling and muttering to herself a low, strange chant that did not sound like a benediction.

## CHAPTER VIII

### 'IT DEPENDS ON THE WOMAN'

CELIA had something to think of as she went back over the moor after that interview with her kinswoman.

A new chapter of family history had been opened to her. She ought to have been shocked at the revelation of the iniquities of her low-born kinsfolk. To tell the truth, she was not greatly moved by the disclosure.

It was already old history. Besides, she was inclined to look leniently on the offences, if offences they were, for which these relatives of hers had suffered. She was not sure, if she had been in their place, that she would not have done as they had done.

The men had been poachers, and the women had gone away and lived their lives. The law had made the men poachers, and the hard conditions of their life had driven the girls away. She could understand their impatience of the hardships and poverty of their lot. She could understand their hatred of the bare, dreary moorland, and the grey, sad sea; the dull, hopeless, monotonous life.

The girls had had no chance here; there was nothing but work and poverty before them. They had surely done well to go away. Whatever happened to them, they were better off than if they had waited here. And for the men, the law had made them what they were. There

was so much of the old lawless blood in Celia's veins that her indignation was hot against the oppressors.

No argument would have availed to convince her that the laws were not cruel and unjust, that they were made for the rich and not for the poor.

She thought of all this as she went tripping back over the heather. She could still trip in spite of the revelation she had heard. It did not take the lightness out of her step; the old dog could not keep up with her.

The sun was sinking as she crossed the moor. There was a blaze of crimson and gold in the west, and a lovely amber light lingered on the hills; and from the valleys beneath a faint lilac mist was creeping up. Celia did not remark the glory of the sunset; she had seen it so many times before. She was sick of the sight, the everlasting sight, of heather-clad moors, and rosy dawns, and crimson sunsets. She was yearning for what lay beyond the hills. Over the purple rim, where the sun was sinking, was a magic region, a strange, new, delightful world that she had read about, that she had never seen.

She paused on the summit of the hill and looked over the sea where the sun was sinking. The waves were reddened with the ruddy sunset glow; a sparkle and light lingered on the water long after it had faded from the land. As she watched the sun sink behind a low purple bank of cloud, she saw a faint blue curl of smoke against the amber sky, and the long white line of a steamer ploughing through the waves. It came round the headland so quickly and noiselessly, stealing like a ghost along the shore, that it was at her feet, at the landing-place beneath the cliff, even while she stood there.

It was the Princess Bordone's steam yacht. Celia had not seen it since the day when she had sprained her foot in getting over the gate in the plantation. The Princess had not gone away in it then; and to-day she was out with the hounds. She never missed a day's hunting now



that the season had really begun. It was only the chase of the wild red deer that had brought her to Gallantry Bower.

Celia had caught a passing glimpse of the Princess more than once as she swept by on her thoroughbred, but she had never had so near a view of her as she had caught between the branches of that hazel hedge. Everybody on Exmoor was praising the Princess Bordone's beauty and her splendid horsemanship; her name was on every tongue. Celia was no judge of horsemanship, and she did not think much of her beauty. Perhaps she was not an impartial judge.

But she was not thinking of the Princess to-night as she went over the hills in the deepening twilight. She did not know that it was so late until she saw the mists settling down on the heights and creeping up from the valleys; she had stayed longer at Wytchanger than she had intended, and her father would be back, impatient for his supper.

He had already arrived when she reached the house. She hurried into the dining-room where the cloth was spread for the evening meal; the lights had not been brought in, and the low, dark room looked darker coming into it from the light.

'Oh, I'm so sorry, papa,' Celia began, and stopped short; she did not see, until she had half crossed the room, that there was anyone there beside her father. She saw the dark outline of a man's figure against the window, and there was something familiar, she thought, in the droop of the shoulders.

'This is Celia,' said her father, by way of introduction, and the stranger came forward to meet her.

'My little playmate!' he said. 'Have you forgotten me, Celia?'

'Forgotten you?'

She could not answer the question at once. She

could not tell in that dim light if she remembered him. She looked up in his face with her questioning eyes to make sure. It might—it might be—

She saw a man of middle height, with clear blue eyes, and a fair, keen, clean-shaven face somewhat bronzed with travel, and with crisp brown hair, and a mouth that could be stern, but was just now tender. A big, square-shouldered, strong man, who might be any age. He had passed his first youth, but had not yet attained middle age, and there were no wrinkles round his eyes, and his hair had not begun to turn grey.

Celia noted all this in her rapid scrutiny, but she did not answer directly; she was making up her mind.

His blue eyes, which had a curious look of indifference in them, softened as he looked at the girl, and his slow pulses quickened.

Celia returned his gaze frankly, curiously, letting her hand rest in his.

'You are—you are Geoffrey!' she said.

She was not sure at first if her long-lost brother, her step-brother, rather, had not come back, but the indolent look in the eyes, the softening of the mouth, brought back her old friend.

'Yes,' he said, smiling at her eagerness. 'I did not think you would remember me. I went away eleven years ago, when you were a little maid of eight years old. I thought you would have forgotten me in all these years.'

'I never forget people,' Celia said simply; 'and I was not likely to forget you.'

She took her hand away, not shyly, but with a heightened colour, and her eyes shining.

'I should hardly have recognised my little playfellow,' he said; 'I—I expected, somehow, to find you a little maid still; I could not understand it was you—I had forgotten I was getting old.'

‘Old?’

The lights had been brought in, and Celia looked at him with the earnest innocent scrutiny of youth for signs of advancing age. He met the puzzled look in her eyes, and smiled as she shook her head.

‘You don’t look a bit older than when you went away,’ she said decidedly. ‘Of course I have changed, I could not always remain a child; but a man does not alter like a girl.’

She ran away, for Janet was bringing in the dinner, and put some hasty touches to her dress, and smoothed her hair. She could not understand, as she looked at her image in the glass, what had brought the roses to her cheeks and a light into her eyes, or why her lips kept breaking into laughter.

Geoffrey Bluett thought the transformation complete when Celia took her place at the head of her father’s table. There was a certain dignity about her that sat curiously on so young a girl. He knew all about her antecedents—the wretched, unequal marriage his old tutor had made, which had separated him from all his friends. He remembered her mother quite well—the coarse country charms and milkmaid beauty. He had expected, if he had thought at all about it, to find a vulgar young woman of unformed manners; a rough, boisterous hoyden, perhaps. He had not expected to meet this beautiful girl, with her graceful figure and her delicate face. He could not think where the delicacy and the culture came from.

All the while the dinner was going on, Celia, at the head of the table, in spite of her ease and grace, was on pins and needles. She was afraid Janet would not remember to pull down her sleeves, that her father would drink too many tankards of ale, that this old friend would see the humiliations and shifts of the poor parson’s household.

She had not cared before, but she cared to-night.

Nat Snow had seen the old man in his cups hundreds of times, and she had never been ashamed. But to-night was different.

When the meal was over, she did not get up and go away, and leave the men together, as was her wont. As long as she was in the room, her father would not take the jar from the cupboard in the wall. He would be content with his mug of ale, or with the bottle of old port Janet had brought from the cellar. Celia took her seat on the window bench, where she could watch him sitting at the table, and keep her eye on the cupboard.

She need not have been so concerned about the jar behind the black wainscot; her father did not seem to miss it. He sipped his glass of port, and talked of the old days. The sight of his former pupil had brought back the old time when Geoffrey and Frank had been boys together.

They talked in low tones about Frank. Celia could not catch what they said, but she gathered that her father had told Geoffrey what she already knew—that he had not heard from his son since the day he left his roof eighteen years ago. Perhaps it was talking about Frank that put that hateful jar out of his head.

Geoffrey Bluett told him about himself, his travels east and west, what he had been doing all these years he had been away. He had not made any money—he was not a man ever likely to make money—and he had spent a good deal. He might have spent more if he had stayed at home and kept up the place. It had certainly been a saving shutting it up all these years. Still, as he explained to the Rector with some warmth, not without a glance at the figure in the white dress in the window seat, he could not keep it shut up for ever. He was growing old, and he was tired of a roving life; he wanted a settled home. If he could not keep up the old place as his father had kept it up, still there would be no rent

to pay; it would not cost him anything, and it was better than letting it go to rack and ruin. He had come home with the intention of going back to the Bower, of taking up the duties of a country squire, and living among his own people. It was while he was on the way back the Princess Bordone's offer reached him. It was too good an offer to refuse, and his lawyers had accepted it without consulting him. It had changed all his plans, and even now he was regretting it, and blaming them for accepting it without his sanction.

The lease was signed, and it was too late to retract; still, it was possible the lady might change her mind. She might grow tired after a time of the monotonous life of the west country.

He had come down for the hunting, and brought some horses with him; he could not go away again without a few gallops over his native moors. He really loved the moors. Celia saw his face light up when he spoke of the familiar places that he had known so well in his boyhood. She could not understand anyone loving them. She had been brought up in the midst of them too; but to her they were inexpressibly dreary. If she once went away, she told herself, she should never, never want to come back.

'I am staying at Pinkery,' he told her, when he went away. 'I am so near I shall often come over to see you. It will be like old times.'

'At Pinkery! Are you not afraid of the ghost?'

'The ghost?' he said. 'I am afraid I don't remember the story about a ghost.'

'Oh, yes; it is quite a true story. A young farmer drowned himself in the pool—you know Pinkery Pool—and it is said that he haunts the place still.'

'Ah, yes! I remember hearing something about it. Pinkery Pool, of course; the haunted mere. I forget what made the fellow drown himself.'

'He—he was in—love—' Celia explained, and stopped unaccountably in the middle of the sentence, stopped and grew rosy red.

'Well, there is no reason why a man should drown himself because he is in love!'

'I don't know any more,' Celia said, her face troubled, and her eyes upon the ground.

'Gal jilted him,' the parson said, with a chuckle. 'He must have been a womanish sort of fellow to drown himself for love!'

'That does not follow,' said Geoffrey, seriously; 'it depends upon the woman.'

He was looking at Celia as he spoke, at the sweet, downcast face, and the black, drooping lashes. He did not know that they were so dark until he saw them on her cheek; that explained the dark shadow beneath her eyes. He had never seen a woman with such deep, dark depths in her eyes before.

If the farmer's sweetheart were like Celia, he could understand the poor young fellow drowning himself; but he could not understand his coming back when she was no longer there.

## CHAPTER IX

### BLACK WILLY

OLD Janet was in great trouble when Celia came down the next morning. A fox had visited the hen-roost in the night and carried off a couple of her best chickens.

Eli, the Rector's ancient serving-man, had left the yard gate open over night, and Reynard had walked in and helped himself. There was a reason for Eli's oversight; he had seen a ghost. Returning late from the Red Deer, where he usually spent his evenings, an adventure had befallen him by the way. To reach the Rectory, on his way home, he had to pass the cross road at the end of the village, where Black Willy's gibbet had been set up. The old man could not exactly explain what had befallen him at this particular spot, whether in the darkness he had tripped over a stone, or if a fit of giddiness had seized him—he had been working in the harvest fields all day—or if the potatoes he had indulged in at the Red Deer had been deeper than usual. Which-ever it might be, he had slipped down by the roadside and fallen asleep. He did not know how long he lay sleeping there. He had been awakened by the sound of voices near, and when he sat up and looked about him, he had seen Black Willy and his train sweep by. He did not know how he got on his feet and ran home. He did not wait to close the yard gate. He did not stop running, he said, until he reached the house and barred and bolted the kitchen door behind him.

Celia laughed when she heard the story. She thought the old man had been overtaken in his cups. Janet was of the same opinion; she had been rating him ever since daybreak.

‘Don’t tell me about yer Black Willies an’ yer ghostes,’ she said scornfully, while the object of her wrath sat silent and subdued at the end of the kitchen table, eating, or making a pretence to eat, the breakfast of fried potatoes and bacon before him. ‘You bided too long at the Red Deer; that’s w’ere they sperrits come from!’

The old man bore her rating meekly, but he had no appetite for his breakfast.

‘It’s got nowt to do wi’ the Red Deer,’ he said, shaking his grizzled head. ‘I knaw what I seed.’

Celia followed him out into the barn where he was at work. She made a pretence of looking after a brood of young turkeys she was rearing. They were her own turkey poults, and if she had luck with them they would be worth a lot of money at Christmas. Janet would sell them for her, and with the money she would be able to buy so many things that she wanted—books among other things.

She was always counting up her turkey poults, making quite sure that none of them were missing. She counted them as she followed the old man into the barn.

‘Five—six—seven; yes, they are all right. How lucky the fox didn’t carry away any of these! I hope you won’t see any more bogles, Eli. It would be very awkward if you were to leave the gate open another night. The fox is sure to come again—perhaps he and the bogles are in league.’

Eli shook his head.

‘Bogles or ghosts, there was no mistake about ’em. I saw ’em as plain as I see you now stannin’ there, an’ they weren’t no further off—’

‘And you really saw Black Willy?’



'I dunno about Black Willy; I saw maist a dozen on 'em, all black, shaddery figures, an' I heard 'em a-swearin' and cursin' awful!'

'And you couldn't be sure which of them was Black Willy?'

'It were his troop, at any rate; I see 'em all gallopin' by, the men a-swearin' an' flecking their whips, and the horses a-pantin'.'

'Why were the horses panting?'

Celia interrupted.

'They allus pants a-gettin' up the hill wi' their loads. They're pack horses, you see.'

'Pack horses? What do they carry in their packs?'

Eli scratched his head. 'Sperrits, I should say—an' baccy—mostly baccy. Kegs o' sperrit, an' bales o' baccy, I've heerd tell, used to be carried in they packs. There was a mort o' smugglin' done in the old days; but sin' old Willy was hanged, an' the rest, the men be most afear'd.'

'Afraid!' said Celia, scornfully. 'What are they afraid of? I don't see any harm in smuggling—it does not hurt anybody—I don't believe it is worse than poaching. If I were a man I should be a poacher—or a smuggler.'

'It's well ye be a maid, then,' old Eli said, shaking his head. 'Ye'd be boun' to get into trouble; the law 'ud be too sharp for ee.'

Celia laughed and tossed her head. 'I don't know about that,' she said.

The old man looked after her as she went through the gate, with her head erect and defiant, and her Juno-like lips breaking into laughter. Eli did not know much about Juno, but he knew the Stoke Edith mouth when he saw it.

'The old, wild blood,' he muttered, 'the old, wild blood; it's boun' to come out. Nat Snow ull have his hands full, I'm thinkin'.'

Celia told Geoffrey Bluett about Eli's ghosts when he

came over to see her father during the morning. He did not treat the matter so lightly as she expected.

'I have heard that story before,' he said. 'When I was a boy there was a good deal of talk about Black Willy. A lot of tales were afloat about haunted roads on the moor—the road from here to Pinkery was one. The story of the love-sick farmer and the haunted pool was got up to keep timid people off the road by night.'

'Why were they so anxious to keep people off the road?' Celia asked. She was unwilling to give up the romantic story.

'Why, for very sufficient reasons. If there was nobody about the roads, there would be no tales told. I did not know there was any smuggling going on now, parson.'

Parson Carmichael shrugged his shoulders. 'It is hard to say. Stoke has always had a reputation for smuggling and poaching. Give a dog a bad name, you know—'

The Squire looked grave. 'I can understand the poaching,' he began, and he looked at Celia and paused. Something in her face stopped him. He remembered, all at once, that she came of a race of poachers and smugglers; he did not know how much she knew—if she had ever heard of the relative who had been killed in his father's woods, of the fine fellow who had been sent abroad. There was scarcely a Stoke Edith poaching affray but a Lake had been mixed up with it. With the girl's eyes upon him, he stammered and laughed. 'I'm sure I don't see why they shouldn't do a little poaching sometimes,' he said awkwardly; 'the deer are plentiful enough, they want thinning. There is no reason why they should not shoot them as well as the farmers; I hear they are talking of shooting them.'

Celia met the glance of his blue eyes with a look of intelligence, a frankness that was characteristic of her,

'The deer do not belong to anyone,' she said warmly; 'they run wild on the moor. Why should not poor men have a right to hunt them as well as the rich?'

'Tush, tush, child! you must not talk about things you don't understand,' her father said testily. 'The Squire here knows different. When he takes his place among us, we shall have him a magistrate, and he will show you what he thinks of poaching then.'

'I wish he would take his place among us! Can't you persuade him, papa, to stay, now that he is here?' Celia said, putting her arm within the old man's, but looking over at Geoffrey.

'I don't think he would want much persuading,' he said in a voice that was low and rather eager. The words were not intended for her father; they had sprung from his lips involuntarily when he had met that challenge in her grey eyes. In that instant it had come to him, the sudden, swift conviction that for him the world held no other woman.

To some men love is a gradual unfolding; to others it comes as a sudden revelation. Geoffrey knew in that moment what had brought him back to Exmoor. It was not the chase of the wild red deer; it was Celia.

She did not blush; she thought he was speaking seriously.

'I am so glad!' she said. 'We all want you back so much. Papa wants you. He never sees anybody—but—but Mr Snow.'

She pronounced the name slowly, with reluctance. She had forgotten the existence of her lover until then.

'Ah! I remember young Nat Snow; the old man is dead, I've heard. Is Nat anything like his father?'

Celia laughed. She remembered the old Nathaniel Snow, a hard-faced, tight-fisted, grasping old miser, who dressed worse than his own labourers, and worked

harder. She was comparing him in her mind with the well-set-up, stalwart yeoman she had promised to marry.

'He is papa's churchwarden,' she said; 'I think the resemblance ends there.'

'And he is something else—' said the parson.

'Yes, oh, yes; but I'm sure Mr Bluett doesn't care to hear about Nat Snow,' Celia said quickly. 'You have not asked him if he will stay to lunch with us, papa, or if he will taste our sweet cider.'

She busied herself fetching the silver tankards from the sideboard, and calling to Janet to bring a jug of cider from the cellar, she placed a foaming mug of ale at the old man's elbow. She would have brought the jar out of the cupboard if he'd asked for it—anything to stave off that hateful subject. The old man fell into the trap, and drank his beer and forgot all about his daughter's engagement. After that day Celia took care that Nat Snow's name was never mentioned in Geoffrey Bluett's presence.

She went to the gate with him when he went away, down the rough, uneven garden path between the rose bushes.

'My roses are nearly all gone,' she said, 'but there are a few buds; I don't know whether you would like to have some. There are no roses at Pinkery.'

She gathered him two or three of her favourites, and gave them to him at the gate.

'I am so glad you have come back,' she said as she put them into his hands. 'You must never, never go away again!'

'I will never go away if you tell me to stay,' he said, bending over the little brown hands that held the roses.

She was standing so near him, with her face turned up to his, and her fearless, bright eyes smiling, and her beautiful, full lips no longer scornful but soft and tender.

'Never?' she said archly. 'Will you promise me, Mr Bluett?'

‘Not Mr Bluett ; Geoffrey—you must always call me Geoffrey, dear.’

‘Geoffrey, then !’ she said, a sudden colour spreading over her face, and her eyes softening. ‘You will never go away again—Geoffrey ?’

‘Not unless you send me away, dear.’

‘I shall never send you away !’ she said hotly. She looked into his face as she spoke, and her eyes drooped, and the colour in her cheeks deepened.

There was a strange tumult at her heart that she could not understand.

‘Remember that is a compact,’ he said, and he raised the little, trembling, brown hand that held the roses to his lips.

He would have liked to take her in his arms and seal the compact on her lips. He had made up his mind as he stood with Celia at the gate. He had found the woman he had been waiting for so long—the glorious possible woman that he had been wandering the world over to find—and there was no obstacle in the way. He was not conscious of any obstacle. He thought he had only to whistle and this little, humble, brown bird of the moorland would flutter to his bosom.

## CHAPTER X

### LETCOMBE FARM

AMONG the straggling farmhouses scattered far apart over Exmoor, there was no more comfortable and substantial building than Letcombe. It stood in a sheltered spot at the head of the combe. When the wind came tearing across the moor on wild winter nights, and the trees in the valley below turned their shivering backs to the gale, Letcombe lay snugly sheltered in a dip of the hills. A belt of pines protected it from the fierce gusts from the sea, and in front of the house green meadows sloped gently away to the sunny south.

A long, low, irregular, white house, with picturesque gable ends and quaint chimney-stacks, and dormer windows nestling beneath the warm brown thatch. A smooth lawn spread in front of the house, but there were not many flowers about; a rose tree creeping along the low garden wall, and clematis trailing over the porch, and a wild, luxuriant growth of honeysuckle twisting about the chimney-stacks.

The rose and the clematis and the woodbine had climbed and crept and twisted there so long that it was not worth while to disturb them. But since the former mistress of the place, old Dame Snow, had died, there had been no one at the farm to care for them. The

seasons had come and gone since her death, but there had been none to watch for the buds bursting in spring, to train the drooping trails of purple blossoms on the porch, or gather a bowl of roses in summer from the twisted, gnarled, old rose tree climbing over the garden wall.

In spite of all her hardness, old Dame Snow, the grandmother of the present owner of Letcombe, loved her flowers and kept up the old traditions of the place. A peacock strutted on the lawn, and a noisy old bell in the picturesque bellcote on the roof, summoned the inmates of the farm to the mid-day meal. The Snows had been yeomen for generations ; they had never been considered in the light of rough, working farmers, though, maybe, they had worked as hard, or harder, than the rest. Still, they had held their heads higher than their neighbours ; they dined off china and damask when other west-country farmers were content with bare boards and wooden platters.

Old Dame Snow, with her pride and her iron rule, had been dead over twenty years, and her son's wife reigned in her place. Her successor did not care very much for the traditions of Letcombe ; she was not country born ; her father had been a wealthy Barnstaple miller, but her rule had been no less hard than the old woman's before her, and she had none of her 'quality' tastes.

She was a splendid manager, everybody allowed ; if she had not her predecessor's spirit and cleverness, she was a hard worker, and careful, too careful, the farm hands agreed, when they grumbled over their scanty fare and their sour cider. 'The "old missus," had been careful and saving, but young Mrs Snow was mean and miserly.'

But that was an old story. She was the 'old missus' now ; her husband had been dead half-a-dozen years, and Nat was master at the farm. He took the reins in his hands when his father died, and he had kept them ever since. It did not matter much while Nat was un-

married who was 'missus,' but when he brought a young wife to Letcombe it would be different.

It was a sore grief to the hard old farmer's wife when she learned that her son was going to throw himself away upon Celia Carmichael. Not that she had any objection to the girl herself, but she hated her low connections. The Lakes had always been a thorn in her side. The girl's mother had been a farm wench at Letcombe during her time; all the family had taken service on the farm, at one time or the other, and the connection had always been attended with trouble and misfortune.

She had a deep-rooted dislike to the whole family; she thought Nat was throwing himself away.

'You'll rue it all your life if you marry that Lake girl,' she had said to him when she first heard of his choice.

'I'm not going to marry a Lake, mother; I'm going to marry Parson Carmichael's daughter,' Nat answered. 'Celia has the best blood in the county in her veins on her father's side. There's not a girl on Exmoor fit to hold a candle to her.'

'How about her witch grandmother, and all the smuggling, poaching crew of uncles and cousins?' the old woman retorted angrily.

'Celia is a Carmichael; she is not a Lake; remember that, mother!' the farmer said, bringing his hand down heavily on the table. 'I'll not have a word said against her in this house. If you don't choose to treat her civilly, you can leave Letcombe as soon as you like. It will not matter how soon you go; we are to be married in the spring. Perhaps, if you were to leave now, Celia would consent to the wedding being earlier—before Christmas. I'll speak to her about it, if you wish.'

The poor woman, on this threat, had burst into tears, and declared that she had meant nothing; that it was



only her love for her son that made her speak ; she did not think any woman good enough for him. She was so humbled at Nat's threat of turning her out of the house that she was ready to receive Celia on any terms.

She called upon her son's betrothed a few days after that interview, and sipped a cup of weak tea in the Rectory dining-room. Celia did not take her into her own special bower ; she gave her a cup of tea in the dark, gloomy dining-room, and talked about indifferent subjects all the time she was drinking it. She would not say a word about her engagement.

The farmer's wife had never drunk tea at the Rectory before. During all the years she had lived at Stoke—and her husband churchwarden—she had never sat down at the Rector's board. She was there as a guest to-day for the first time, and she was not quite at her ease.

She looked round the dusky room with a feeling of awe as she sipped her tea. Though the place was plain and bare, and the furniture old and shabby, there was an air of dignity about it that was wanting at Letcombe. Perhaps the portraits on the walls gave the dignity. It was not the old oak or the silver on the sideboard. There was plenty of old oak at Letcombe, and quaint old silver mugs and teapots in a glazed cupboard against the wall of the best room ; but there were no portraits.

What is a family without portraits ?

From the dark wainscoted walls Celia's ancestors looked down upon the farmer's wife. Men and women in the strange, old-world costumes of the last century, and all of them bearing a curious resemblance to Celia. The men all had the same short, high nose, and the women had the same grey-blue eyes and the long lashes. Celia was like the men of the family, but her eyes were like the women. There the resemblance

ceased. Not any of them had the black hair, and the full lips, and the warm brown complexion that were Celia's especial charm. She owed all these to her peasant ancestry, to the poachers and smugglers and tillers of the soil that Mrs Snow regarded with scorn.

There was a portrait over the mantelpiece that Celia had no part in. It was of a fair, slender, blue-eyed woman, dressed in a white dress in the fashion of fifty years ago—a delicate, refined face, shaded with yellow curls that had a glint of gold in them.

It was the portrait of Mr Carmichael's first wife. Poor Martha's humble lineaments found no place on her husband's walls.

When Mrs Snow parted with Celia at the garden gate, she kissed her quite affectionately.

'You will come to see me soon, dear,' she said; 'you will come to tea; there are so many things I have got to show you. You have never yet seen your future home.'

Celia bore the salute meekly, and promised to come soon.

'You must come early, and spend a long afternoon,' said the lady.

She was like the Queen of Sheba: the sight of these family portraits had taken all the spirit out of her.

Celia did not fulfil her promise to spend that long afternoon at Letcombe until a month had passed. She was in no hurry to see her new home. It took her a long time to get accustomed to the thought of her engagement—to get reconciled to it. She had made a stipulation with her lover that she was not to be hurried, that the wedding was not to take place till the spring. Going over to Letcombe and seeing the house, seemed to bring the dreaded event nearer, to make it more real.

She made up her mind quite suddenly, a few days

after she had parted with Geoffrey Bluett at the garden gate, that she would go to the farm and get the troublesome visit over.

Perhaps there was a reason for the suddenness of her decision. Something had gone wrong with her since that parting at the garden gate. She could not get Geoffrey's words out of her mind, his promise that he would not go away unless she sent him. She recalled them a hundred times a day, and her finger-tips still thrilled at the remembrance of the touch of his lips, and the passion in his eyes filled her heart with a strange, sweet tumult.

She could not understand herself, and she was afraid, dreadfully afraid, of these new, sweet emotions that were stirring at her heart. She went over to Letcombe to get rid of them.

There was a meet of the staghounds at Larkbarrow, a dozen miles away, and Nat Snow and her father had ridden over together. She had seen them ride off across the moor together, and she had brought her lover out a stirrup-cup at starting. 'Mind you bring me home a full account of the beautiful Princess. I am dying to hear about her,' she said to him as she stood patting the smooth, glossy neck of his curvetting steed while he drained the stirrup-cup.

He looked down at her and smiled as he gave her back the cup. 'I shall have no eyes for the Princess Bordone,' he said gallantly; 'there is only one beautiful princess in all the world for me!'

Celia ought to have blushed at her lover's compliment, but she curled her lips scornfully, and when he had ridden away she threw down the cup in the path. She could not bear to hold a thing that his lips had touched.

'Highty-tighty! what's come o' the maid, a-britting o' the maister's silver cup!' old Janet exclaimed, when she saw the cup in the path.

Celia went over to Letcombe early in the afternoon ; she wanted to get the hateful visit over. It was a hot August afternoon, and there was little shade on the moor, but Celia was not afraid of the sun. Her complexion was not one that the sun's hot kisses spoiled. They only warmed it to a richer and more delightful hue. It was late in August, and the heather was purpling the moor ; it was like a rich, purple mantle flung over the hills, flecked here and there, where the furze was in bloom, with the shimmer and sheen of gold. A faint lilac mist of heat hung over the distant slopes of purple and grey, and away beyond the edge of the cliffs, was the silver glint of the Severn sea.

There was not a breath of air moving to fill the brown sails of the fishing-boats that lay becalmed on the smooth green water, like painted ships upon a painted ocean ; but the busy, little coasting steamers that flit from port to port during the holiday season, were ploughing their way merrily through the waves. Celia stood watching them when she gained the top of the hill ; the sea had always a fascination for her. They were not all coasting steamers ; the Princess Bordone's steam yacht was ploughing her way through the waves with the rest. Perhaps the Princess was on board ; there was a gay little pennant flying from the mast ; perhaps she had grown tired of the hunting already, and had gone away for a cruise. Celia would have given anything to change places with the Princess at that moment ; she would have gone away,—away,—away—and she would never have come back again.

Something had come over Celia. She could not understand the passionate yearning stirring at her heart. Her life had hitherto flowed on with little change or excitement to ruffle it, and now, all at once, a sudden tumult had arisen where all before was calm and tranquillity. A strange unrest had taken hold of her ; a

hunger of the heart that frightened her, while it filled it with a new, strange, delicious joy.

She was afraid of herself; she had a bewildered impression that something had happened to her, that a crisis had come in her life.

She did not think of Nat Snow as she loitered among the heather. He stood apart in her life. He had nothing to do with that tumult throbbing in her veins. She had promised to marry him; it had been a mistake from the beginning she told herself, but she would keep her promise. She had her own idea of honour, of loyalty. Perhaps it was some pricking of conscience that drove her across the moor on this breathless August afternoon.

But while her lagging steps led her in the direction of Letcombe Farm, all her thoughts were of Geoffrey Bluett; all her plans and her hopes led, by straight or circuitous routes, direct to him.

## CHAPTER XI

### AN UNEXPECTED GUEST

It was a lovely old farmhouse, with wide dormer windows in the gables, and attics under the thatch. The honeysuckle on the roof was in bloom now, and the purple clematis hung over the porch, and the windows looked out over the heather-clad moors.

Mrs Snow did not take Celia into the common dining-hall, where there was a hospitable, open fireplace as big as a room, and a long, polished oak table on trestles beneath the window, that would have accommodated all the farmers in the parish.

She took her through a stone passage into a stuffy, unused room beyond, which was dignified by the name of the drawing-room. She drew up the blinds when she went in, and let in the afternoon sunshine.

'We are obliged to keep the blinds down,' she explained to Celia; 'the sun fades the carpets and the furniture.'

The carpet really looked as if the sun had faded it. It had been down more than half a century, but there were no holes in it. It did not bear any evidence of wear, only the sun had taken the colour and pattern out of it. The furniture was all of a heavy, bygone fashion, and the seats of the chairs were covered with brown holland. It did not look like a room that was ever used ;

there were no ornaments about, no flowers, no litter of female occupation, and there were no books.

Celia shivered as she looked round the room at the bare walls, the stiff, formal furniture, the faded carpet, and the beadwork fire-screen before the hearth. She was picturing herself living a dreary, colourless life here among all these hideous surroundings.

A big, strapping farm servant brought in the tea. The best silver had been brought out for the occasion, and the old-fashioned, blue Worcester cups and saucers that Mrs Snow prided herself upon. Celia did not care a fig for china or for silver. She did not once notice the Worcester cups. She was wondering all through the dreary meal how she should ever live here, and then her mind wandered away to the white-painted yacht she had seen steaming gaily across the waves. If she could get away from the place sometimes, like the Princess Bordone, and come back again at long intervals, it might be possible. But to live here always, to be shut up in this dull prison house, to be shut up with Nat Snow—oh, it would be dreadful, dreadful!

When Celia had dutifully drank Mrs Snow's vapid, tasteless tea, and swallowed a slice of stale farmhouse bread and butter, the lady proposed to show her the house. She was not very anxious to see the house, but she had had enough of Mrs Snow's hospitality. There had been some apology for the staleness of the bread; they were baking the next day, and Celia had timed her visit on an unfortunate day, when the bread was a week old.

She followed her future mother-in-law meekly through the house, and listened with what appearance of interest she could muster to her stories of the former inmates of Letcombe.

It was a large, rambling old house, full of long passages and bare, untenanted rooms. The stairs, which had heavy

oak balustrades, were uncarpeted, and Celia's footsteps as she followed her guide, seemed to send strange echoes whispering through the long passages and the empty rooms. Mrs Snow threw open a door at the head of the stairs. 'This is the best bedroom,' she said, 'but it has not been slept in for twenty years. Dame Snow died in it, and no one has occupied it since her death.'

It was a big, bare room, with an ancient carved bedstead with hangings of some red material. The hangings were faded and moth-eaten, but the quaint carving of the bedstead was in good preservation. Successive coats of beeswax in times gone by seemed to have preserved it. There was an oak hanging press, with the same quaint carving, in another part of the room, and an old carved chest under the window. Celia gave a little cry of delight when she saw the beautiful old carving.

'Oh, this is lovely!' she said. 'Why does not anybody sleep here? Why do you keep this beautiful room locked up?'

Mrs Snow smiled at her eagerness, but she did not answer her question.

'You can use this room if you like,' she said; 'but I don't think you would find the maids willing to clean it. It has not been thoroughly cleaned for years.'

Celia had not noticed until then that the floor and the furniture were thick with dust, and cobwebs stretched across the windows.

'Why has it not been cleaned?' she asked; then a chilly feeling seemed to creep over her and answer her question. 'Is it haunted?' she said, dropping her voice.

Mrs Snow shrugged her shoulders.

'It is only servants' idle tales, I daresay; I have never seen anything myself, and the noises do not disturb anybody,' she said.

'There are noises?'

'There are always noises in an old house. The



boards are always creaking ; they creak if a mouse runs over them, and the wainscot cracks whenever there is a change of weather. It very often cracks and makes a loud report, like a cannon, in the middle of the night, but everyone knows what it is ; and the rats always begin scampering about behind the panelling directly it is dark. When you live here you will get accustomed to the noises.'

Celia shivered and went out of the room. She was not so sure that she should ever get accustomed to the noises, and it would be distinctly unpleasant to have a ghostly old grandmother frightening the servants out of their wits.

She looked into half-a-dozen other bedrooms after this—dreary rooms, with bare, whitewashed walls, and uncarpeted floors. The furniture in all was heavy and old-fashioned—clumsy four-post bedsteads, and rush-bottom chairs, and big wooden presses. Everything was spotlessly clean, and the stiff, white dimity curtains to the windows were as white as blossom. There were no pictures on the walls, no photographs or dainty trifles on the mantelpieces, or the high mahogany drawers, or on the well-scrubbed, wooden dressing-tables, and there was no female litter about. There was no trace in any of the rooms of the former occupants, of the men and women who had lived here, of the little children who had been born here. There were no broken toys, or torn books, or rudely-coloured pictures, no little finger-marks on the walls, or scratches on the window panes.

Celia went down the stairs slowly, with a strange feeling, as if the feet of little children who had once lived in this desolate house were pattering after her. She was sure she heard the sound of pattering feet behind her. The house seemed full of ghostly noises ; whenever a door was shut it sent dreadful echoes through the long passages,

and up and down the stairs. She would not go up into the attics ; she had seen quite enough. It seemed to her that all the mothers and children who had once inhabited those desolate rooms were following her about, not welcoming her, but warning her. She did not breathe freely until she was out again in the sunshine. As soon as she was out of sight of the house she began to run. She wanted to get away from it.

A sort of terror had fallen upon her, and she wanted to run to get away from it. She remembered all the stories she had heard of the pinching, scraping lives of the former inmates of Letcombe, how they had heaped up their money, ground it out of the labour of the poor. She did not know why she thought of this ; it had nothing to do with her ; but it stirred a strange revolt in her. She would have nothing to do with their ill-gotten wealth, she told herself ; she hated the pinching and scraping. She had nothing in common with the careful housewives who had wasted their lives in heaping up money. She was sure the money they had saved would bring a curse with it ; it would never, never bring happiness.

When Celia got back to the Rectory, her father had not returned. She had heard, or fancied she heard, the huntsman's horn on the hills, but she had not taken much notice of it. In the stag-hunting season on Exmoor the horn can be heard on most days down in the valleys, or among the folds of the hills, or echoing from some distant heights. The wind carries the sound up from the valleys, and the hills give back the echo, hill after hill, sounding in the stillness and silence of the moor like the horns of Elf-land blowing,—blowing—

All the horns in Elf-land might have been blowing about her, and Celia would not have noticed them in her present mood. She ran quickly along the moorland road, not stopping to observe the beauty of the scene, the cloud shadows moving from hill to hill, the lovely

lilac mists in the valleys, the golden radiance on the sea. She had seen these things a thousand times before. Her heart was too full of revolt, of dumb anguish and despair, to have room for outside things. She wanted to sit down and cry and bemoan herself. Deep in her woman's nature great floods of tears were rising, but she beat them passionately down. She would not let Janet see that she had been crying. The engagement had been of her own making; she had no one but herself to thank for it. Whatever happened, she would not let anyone see that she repented of it. If it killed her, she told herself, as she came hurrying blindly down the steep moorland road, she would go through with it. No one should guess what it cost her. Once, a stag crossed her path, panting and spent, and some startled hinds rose up out of the fern, and stole away into the wood as she went by.

When she reached the Rectory, she did not go into the house. She lingered in the garden; she did not want Janet to see her come in hot and breathless; she would not understand why she had been running. The sun had gone off the garden now; there was a high wall, with peaches and plums trained upon it, and weeds and grasses growing on the top that sheltered her from observation from the road. It was an untidy, old-fashioned garden, in which vegetables and flowers grew together, and weeds did not struggle in vain for supremacy.

Among the cabbages and the kidney beans were pansies blooming, and sweet-williams and mignonette; there was a bush of grey lavender under the garden wall, and a hardy little tree of lad's-love grew by the gate.

Celia broke off one of the knotty little twigs and crushed it in her fingers as she walked down the garden path, with despair and anguish gnawing at her heart. She would go through with it, she told herself with a

shiver, though she hated the man and his place; she would not make herself the laughing-stock of the neighbourhood. Perhaps she would get used to it in time—the gloomy old house, and the ghosts, and the midnight noises. She shivered when she thought of the shut-up chamber, and the footsteps pattering after her down the stairs. There had always been enmity between the Lakes and the Snows; they would never be friendly ghosts; they would always hate her.

While Celia was pondering this wild nonsense, an exciting scene was happening behind the high garden wall. The stag that had passed her had gone away down Gallantry Combe, and the hounds were in hot pursuit, and the field were tearing down the steep hillside.

The sound of the Master's horn disturbed her reverie, but when she reached the garden gate, the train of horsemen had swept by, and she only caught sight of a flying pink coat in the distance, and heard the heavy thud of the horses' hoofs upon the heather.

'Papa will be coming back directly,' she called out to Janet, as she ran upstairs to take off her hat and remove the traces of those hateful tears from her eyes.

She had not been there a minute, it seemed to her, before she heard a dull thud of footsteps coming up the road.

'Why had they come back so quickly?' she asked herself; but before she had time to answer the question—to think—the footsteps were coming up the garden path. The regular, even tread smote upon her ear. She was sure that something had happened, and she flew to the window, and saw a little group of men beneath, carrying a burden between them.

Something had happened.

Celia ran down the stairs and met the men in the hall. Her father was already there before her, giving

directions, and Geoffrey Bluett was among the men who were carrying the burden.

A lady had met with an accident in the hunting field, and they had brought her to the Rectory, being the nearest house. Her horse had fallen upon her, and she had been picked up unconscious. The accident had happened at the crossway where Black Willy's gibbet had stood. It was not the first accident that had happened at that spot; there was a steep bit of road above it, and a treacherous dip at the turn, where anyone riding hard down the hill, and a stranger to the road, might easily be entrapped. Popular superstition gave Black Willy the credit of being concerned in the accidents that happened here. The corner was his; he had a right to resent the intrusion of strangers.

They took the woman who had been injured into the inner room, and laid her upon a couch. It was Celia's sitting-room, the only room in the house that boasted a couch. She moaned as they laid her down, and a spasm of pain passed across her white face.

Janet had already brought in some water, and Celia, putting the men aside, unfastened her riding-habit, and sprinkled the water on her face. She fancied she had seen the white face before, and the beautiful hair that fell down about her shoulders as she took off her hat.

It was of an unusual colour—a tawny chestnut with red lights in it, and it rippled in rich, ruddy waves over the arm of the shabby couch. Celia twisted it up quickly; she could not bear that Geoffrey Bluett should see it. It was harsh, coarse hair, she remarked; it would not have all those waves and ripples in it if it were not coarse, and in some lights it was red. Her fingers trembled as she put it up and hid it way from the eyes of the men who were looking on.

Then, not till then—till she had rolled the conspicuous

hair up out of sight—did she remember where she had last seen it. The scene in the wood came back to her—the beautiful, white-robed lady in the green jerkin, with loose, flowing hair, that the noonday sun had turned into living gold.

It was the Princess Bordone.

## CHAPTER XII

### THE PRINCESS BORDONE'S STEWARD

A DOCTOR who happened to be among the field had directed the moving, and with the assistance of Geoffrey he reduced the fracture of the injured arm. The damage had not been very much—only a fractured arm, fractured rather high up above the elbow, and a few bruises.

It might have been worse. Geoffrey shuddered when he thought what it might have been ; what it seemed to be, when the great, black horse was on its back kicking and plunging among the heather, and the woman lay beneath.

He helped the doctor to reduce the fracture, to straighten the poor, damaged arm, and put together the jagged ends of the broken bone.

It was lucky he was there. Celia could not have rendered any assistance ; she would have fainted just at the moment when her presence of mind was most needed, and old Janet would have been worse than useless.

Celia stood by and saw Geoffrey hold the beautiful, bare, white arm, while the doctor was adjusting the bandages. She thought she had never seen a man's face so strong and tender. She hated herself for being jealous of the poor creature moaning on the couch. He was whispering words of encouragement in her ear all through the tedious operation, and when the

Princess Bordone opened her eyes and murmured her broken thanks, it was Geoffrey she was addressing, not the doctor.

Celia put some wine to her pale lips, but she turned away from her, and Geoffrey took the glass from her hand.

She took the wine from him, and smiled up into his face; Celia thought she had never seen such beautiful eyes. They were the tawny colour of the wine in the glass, of the ruddy lights in her hair, and the pupils were large and dark. The wine brought the blood back to her white cheeks and lips, and if Geoffrey had not held her in his arms, she would have risen from the couch.

'You must lie still a few minutes longer,' he said, bending over her; 'it will not be long—just a little more patience. You have borne it splendidly!'

The Princess sighed and lay back in his arms, but she did not close her eyes. Celia was sure if she had been in her place, if Geoffrey Bluett's arms had been about her, with his face so near that his breath stirred the loose strands of hair on her forehead, she would have shut her eyes tight; she would not have been able to look at him.

The Princess's eyes wandered from Geoffrey's face to Celia, who was standing, pale and frightened, beside the couch. There was a half-curious, half-questioning look in her eyes when they rested on Celia.

'This is Mr Carmichael's daughter,' he said. 'You know Mr Carmichael; you have met him often in the field. The accident happened close to his gate, so we brought you in here.'

She smiled and nodded to Celia. 'We are neighbours,' she said; 'and you'—turning to Geoffrey—'you are a stranger here? I have not seen you at the meet before.'



‘Not a stranger ; I was born near here—at Gallantry Bower—but I have been away for some years.’

‘You are Mr Bluett?’ she said quickly, the quick colour suffusing her beautiful bare neck and throat ; ‘and I am your tenant—’

‘I must ask you to keep still,’ the doctor said rather sharply. ‘I will not tax your patience much longer, but you must not move, please, for a few minutes.’

The Princess resigned herself to her fate ; she lay quite still, with Geoffrey’s strong arms about her. The colour on her cheeks burnt deeper as she lay there, and her bosom was heaving.

Celia could not think what moved her ; she could not understand her agitation.

Janet came to the door a few minutes later, and beckoned her out. ‘A gentleman outside wants to speak to you,’ she said.

Celia stepped out into the passage, and a man came forward—the man she had seen with the Princess in the wood.

‘There has been an accident, I hear,’ he said, ‘and—and the lady has been brought here.’

Something in his face, in his voice, struck Celia even at that moment. ‘It is not very bad,’ she said quickly ; ‘it is only a broken arm, and the—the lady is very brave ; she is bearing it splendidly. The doctor has nearly finished setting it.’

The man gave a sigh of relief. ‘Thank God !’ he said hoarsely ; ‘I heard it was more serious. She will be able to be moved, then, when it is over?’

As he put the question, he met a look in Celia’s eyes. He met it steadily, almost defiantly, and his brow lowered.

‘I want to know,’ he said, ‘because of sending for the carriage. It would be awkward for you to have an invalid here, and the Princess would not get the attention she requires.’

Celia hesitated before she answered him. She was hurt and annoyed ; something in his manner hurt her. ' That will depend upon the doctor,' she said coldly ; ' if you will wait here, I will let you know what he says.'

She threw open the door of the dining-room as she spoke, and closed it after him, and went back down the passage.

Left alone in the empty room, the Princess Bordone's steward stood where Celia had left him, with his head bowed and his face pale and agitated.

He recovered himself presently, and looked round the room with strange interest, his eyes lingering on the old carved oak, the silver cups on the dresser, the family portraits on the walls. He was standing before one of these—the woman over the mantelpiece with the fair ringlets—when Celia came into the room. He was so preoccupied that he did not hear her come in until she spoke to him.

' The doctor does not see any reason why the Princess should not be moved when the operation is over,' she said coldly.

' Then I will send for the carriage at once,' he said, in a tone of relief. He bowed and left the room, and Celia saw him striding down the garden path through the knot of men who had gathered at the gate. Her father was among the men at the gate, but he did not take any notice of him ; he brushed by him, though he made a gesture as he passed as if he would detain him.

' What a surly, ill-mannered fellow !' Celia said indignantly, as she saw him go down the path. She did not know why she was angry with him.

An hour later a carriage from the Bower drove up to the Rectory. The steward was driving. He threw the reins to the groom, and jumped down when the carriage stopped.

' Is the Princess ready ?' he asked, stalking into the hall as if the place belonged to him.

'She is quite ready,' Celia said, coming forward from her seat in the window; 'but I'm sure I don't know if she will be able to walk.'

'We can carry her,' he said shortly. Something in his voice affected her strangely—stirred up an unreasoning sense of anger.

'She is in there,' she said, throwing open the door that led into the inner room.

The Princess was lying on the couch where they had laid her when she was brought in unconscious. But she was not unconscious now; she was talking, almost gaily it seemed to Celia, to the men who were standing about the room waiting for the carriage to come up. Her dress had been arranged, and her beautiful white neck, which had been exposed, was covered up. Her injured arm was bandaged to her side, and the sleeve of her riding habit, that had been cut, was fastened round it. She did not look any the worse for the accident; her eyes were bright, and there was a rich colour on her cheeks, and her recent agitation had quite disappeared.

She stopped in her gay talk when the door opened, and she heard the man's step on the floor outside.

'Oh, you have come, Elwood!' she said. 'How long you have been; I thought you were never coming!'

She spoke with some *hauteur*, as if she were addressing a servant, and she kept her face averted; she did not look towards him.

He did not take any notice of her words; he came up to the couch, and looked down upon her with his dark brows drawn together.

'Can you walk?' he asked her in his low, surly voice; 'or shall I carry you?'

'I—I think I can walk,' the Princess said; but she was not looking at the man, she was looking over to the window seat where Geoffrey was sitting.

He got up at once and came to her side. 'You must not think of walking,' he said.

'I—I would rather walk,' she said, rising to her feet.

The colour dropped out of her face when she tried to get on her feet, and Geoffrey put his arm round her to support her, and the doctor walked by her side.

Celia took up the cushion from the couch she had been lying on to carry it out to the carriage, but Elwood stopped her.

'I have brought some cushions,' he said harshly. 'I don't think the Princess will need these.'

He walked behind the little procession, and would have helped the Princess into the carriage, but she waved him aside. She would not have his help.

The doctor took the seat in the carriage by her side to succour her wounded arm, and Geoffrey arranged the cushions.

'You must come over to Gallantry to see me soon,' she said with a gracious smile, as she drove away. 'You must come and look over your old place.'

The steward, who was standing by the step, overheard her parting words, and looked at Geoffrey darkly.

'This is Mr Bluett, the owner of the Bower,' she explained haughtily. 'My steward, Mr Elwood.' She did not look at him as she spoke; she turned her head aside.

The men bowed to each other, and Elwood turned away quickly and got on the box, and the carriage drove off.

In the hurry of her departure, the Princess Bordone had forgotten to thank Celia for her attention and hospitality.

Geoffrey stood at the gate looking after her for some minutes after the carriage had turned the corner of the road. He looked straight before him over the moor.

His face was hard and white; he seemed to be asking himself a question.

‘You will come in and have some supper?’ Celia said, touching his arm.

He did not notice her light touch on his arm, and she repeated her question.

‘No, not to-night,’ he said abruptly. ‘I—I want to get back.’ He would not go into the house again; he mounted his horse, which had been tied to the gate, and rode away. He was absent and preoccupied; he did not say good-bye to her at the gate to-night. He only nodded to her as if she were a stranger, and rode away.

Celia went back to the house with her heart swelling, and the tears brimming in her eyes. She was angry and indignant. She hated the Princess for her beauty; she called her a bold, forward creature. She had talked to Geoffrey as if she had known him for years, and she did not seem to mind that her dress was disarranged and her shoulders bare while she lay in his arms. Perhaps it was her foreign ways. Geoffrey had been dazzled by her beauty; he was as ready to be her slave as all the other men on the moor. The steward, Elwood, had seen it; he was jealous already. Celia was sure he was jealous. Whatever the tie was between him and his beautiful mistress, she had given him the right to be jealous.

When Celia went back into the room where the supper was laid, the dusk had already fallen. There was a man sitting in the window, and her father was in his old place at the table, with a tankard of ale before him. She did not see that it was her lover until he had risen from his seat and come forward to meet her. He took both her hands in his, and drew her towards him.

‘You have had a great fright, you poor little thing,’ he said. ‘It was a shame to bring that woman here.’

‘Where else should they bring her?’ Celia said

warmly. 'Of course they would bring her here. It happened at the crossway. This was the nearest house.

'They should not have brought her in here if I had been here,' he said.

'I don't understand.'

'No, dear, how should you? People are already talking about this foreign woman. Perhaps we are not accustomed to foreign ways down here. It struck me—it has struck a good many others besides me—that she is not exactly the sort of woman we should care for our wives and sweethearts to meet—and for them to bring her here!' He had drawn Celia towards him as he spoke, as if he would shelter her in his strong arms. She would have shrunk away from him at another time, but she did not shrink away to-night. She was feeling hurt, wounded; the tenderness and protection in his voice touched her melting mood.

'I do not understand,' she repeated, and a delicate colour stole into her white cheeks.

'No,' he said, looking down into her troubled eyes; 'no, how should you understand? All women are not angels like you! I'm afraid this Princess Bordone is not all square. There must be some reason for her hiding herself down here.'

'Reason?' Celia said quickly; 'of course she has a reason! She has come here for the hunting.'

'That may be one reason,' he said, shrugging his shoulders, 'but not the only reason. There is a lover in the case.'

'A lover!' She flushed a deep scarlet. 'You have been listening to idle gossip,' she cried indignantly.

'Perhaps so,' he answered her indulgently; 'I may be mistaken. The man may be her husband, of course; he may be Prince Bordone for all we know, but there must be some reason for his masquerading as a steward. If the woman comes this way again, I wish you to refuse to

see her. We are plain yeomen up here, and we do not choose that our wives should mix with—'

He left the word unsaid. The rising colour in Celia's face stopped him. He drew her to his bosom and kissed her hot cheek.

'My darling,' he murmured, with his arm about her, 'I love you so dearly, that I would not have your name mixed up with this woman's, not for all I am worth.'

She saw his sunburnt cheek pale as he spoke. It touched her more than any words he had ever said to her—that he should love and honour her so much that a princess was not good enough for her. Geoffrey Bluett had been her ready slave, had been caught by her flimsy wiles; but Nat would have nothing to do with her; her beauty had not taken him in.

When Celia remembered how she had hated him an hour ago, how she had loathed the thought of her marriage, and had hungered after the love of another man, she was overwhelmed with a sense of shame and dishonour. She suffered his caresses; she did not shrink away from him. In her contrition, she was ready to kneel at his feet and sob out her miserable confession.

## CHAPTER XIII

### IN THE CHURCH PORCH

CELIA hated herself the next day when she recalled that scene with Nat Snow in the dusky twilight ; when she remembered how she had given herself away. She tramped up and down her room for an hour before she went to bed, going through the incidents of that hateful day. Poor old Janet, who slept in the next room, couldn't get a wink of sleep till daybreak.

The only ray of comfort Celia could get was that Geoffrey had not guessed her secret. She was spared that humiliation. He did not know, he would never know, that she loved him. She would tell him now, when they met again, of her engagement ; that she was going to marry Nat Snow. She would not keep it a secret any longer. He should not think she was jealous of the foreign woman who had bewitched him.

The thought of the foreign woman, as she termed the Princess Bordone, filled her with anger and bitterness. She knew more about her than other people ; she had found out her secret by accident—her pretty tricks, and airs, and pretence, the fascinating ways that the men were raving about. She almost loved Nat for not being taken in with them.



He had called her a dreadful name—at least he had stopped short. He knew more about her than the rest ; he had not been taken in by her. Geoffrey would find her out by-and-by. Meanwhile, he should see that she did not care.

Geoffrey did not give Celia a chance of telling him of her engagement till nearly a week later. He kept away from the Rectory for some reason. Celia counted the days while he was away, wondering if he would ever come again, and, in spite of all her fine resolutions, hungering for his coming.

He came at last.

She had gone over to the church to practise the hymns for the following day. It was Saturday afternoon, or evening rather, and she had remembered that she had not tried over the hymns for the next day. Celia was not very keen over the church music. Sometimes she did not try over the Sunday hymns for weeks together ; they took their chance when the Sunday came. It was not exactly the sort of church music at Stoke to make her keen—a wheezy old harmonium, dreadfully out of tune, that was so hoarse at times with standing on the damp stone floor of the church that St Cecilia herself couldn't have got any tune out of it.

Celia hammered at it in a perfunctory way on Sundays, and the rustic congregation followed as best they could. She did not take much trouble with the singing. She would not have gone up to the church this Saturday afternoon, but she was in a softening mood.

She did not quite understand herself. A man with that mood on him would have smoked a cigar, and taken a lonely walk over the moor. Celia went up to the church and played over her hymn tunes.

It was a little dark church, plain inside to bareness, with no attempt at decoration.

In the place of monumental tablets on the walls, the

Commandments were unusually conspicuous, and were distributed about the church. The longer ones had each a separate table to themselves, while the shorter ones were huddled up together. They occupied nearly all the wall space of the church, between the windows of the nave, on the chancel walls, and squeezed into a corner of the belfry behind the font. Perhaps there was a need for this unusual display of the Decalogue at Stoke.

The harmonium where Celia practised her hymn tunes stood in the chancel, behind the screen. The only object of interest in the church was the screen, a quaint bit of sixteenth century carved work.

She could not see very well in the fading light, but she went mechanically through the hymn tunes, not thinking very much about what she was doing. If she had known that Geoffrey Bluett was standing in the porch listening, she would not have sat so long there strumming.

He had ridden back from the meet with her father, but he had not gone into the Rectory. Janet had told him that Celia was over at the church, and he had followed her there, and tied his horse up to the gate.

When Celia had finished her playing, she got up, and saw him standing bareheaded in the porch.

'You here!' she said, with a little catch in her voice. She had been thinking of him all the time she had been playing, but the sight of him in the porch startled her, took away her breath.

She must have turned pale, for he took her two hands in his, and put her down in the seat in the dark porch.

'Have I frightened you?' he said, in a tone of concern. 'Did you take me for a ghost?'

'No, it is nothing,' she said quickly. 'I did not expect to see you, that was all. I thought you were not coming again.'

‘Not coming again ! Why should I not come again ?’ he said, his eyes meeting hers with a quick, asking look that brought the colour to her pale cheeks.

‘Oh, I don’t know ; why should you come ?’ she said helplessly.

‘Why ?’ he said in a lower voice ; ‘that is a question for you to answer. Is there any reason why I should not come ?’

She knew what he meant. She knew he had heard of her engagement. It was that that had kept him away.

She moved away from him a little unsteadily, and put out her hand with an unconscious gesture. He took her cold little hand between his and pressed it. There was a long silence. She was debating with herself if she should tell him. That touch of his hand settled the doubt.

‘There is no reason !’ she said passionately.

She was sorry a moment after she had spoken. But it was too late to recall her words.

‘No ?’ he said ; ‘I am very glad. I thought report had lied.’

Celia hung her head. She would have given worlds to have spoken, but her tongue was tied. He must know some day ; he ought to know now. A soft rain was falling outside, in the churchyard, it blew in the porch, and drifted against the girl’s shoulder as she stood there. She shivered, and he felt her hand trembling.

‘Are you cold ?’ he asked her.

‘No, not cold ; it is very close in here.’

She would have got up and gone out into the rain, but he detained her.

‘You are trembling,’ he said ; ‘what are you frightened of, dear ?’

Celia hung her head ; she could not meet his eyes, and

her beautiful, full, childish lips were drawn down at the corners.

She looked childish and troubled, and about to cry.

‘What is it?’ he said. But she did not answer.

‘I think I must go back now,’ she said. ‘Papa will want his supper—and it is getting late.’

‘Not very late; and the rain will stop presently. Let me look in your eyes and see if I can read the trouble there.’

He leaned slightly forward, and turned the girl’s drooping face towards him.

She could not meet his eyes.

‘Don’t be afraid,’ he said; ‘let me see.’

It was a fair, unlined face, the face of a child; there was not a line upon it, not a shadow. But the eyes were the eyes of a woman, and were full of that elusive mystery which a woman vainly tries to veil when she is in the presence of a man she loves.

Celia did not succeed in veiling it. She jumped up, blushing guiltily.

‘The rain is nothing,’ she said; ‘and I’m sure papa will be expecting me.’

She went out of the dark porch into the green churchyard, and he walked by her side between the humble graves.

It was an old-fashioned yard, with green mounds, and grey, lichen-covered stones all aslant, and an ancient yew tree, with the dead sheltering beneath its shade. A neglected place, with grass growing on the path, and rank growths of nettles covering up the humble monuments.

Celia stopped by the gap in the wall where the stones had fallen away. The heather and the moss had long ago covered them up, and nettles and weeds grew about them. She pushed the nettles aside, and pointed to a little green mound on the other side.

'Do you remember the little dog you gave me when you went away?' she said.

'I remember it quite well; is it buried here?'

Celia nodded.

'It was killed a week after you went away, just as I had got to love it; a waggon ran over it and killed it. I buried it here, and put up that stone to it. It was a bit of stone I found in the yard, and I cut the name upon it and the date.'

He stooped and read the name and the date which were rudely cut on a slab of blue stone on the grave of his old dog. The date brought back the old time and his lost youth, and he was a boy again. When he looked at the girl he saw that there were tears in her eyes.

'You must have cared for him a good deal to take all that trouble,' he said.

'Cared?' she said. 'I cried for a week. Oh! you don't understand, you don't know what it is to love a thing and lose it. I have never loved anything since.'

She moved away down the path quickly, and when he overtook her, there was a pain on her face like the trouble on a child's face when it has met with a grief it cannot understand, and her cheeks were wet.

'I think I understand,' he said. 'You have had so little love in your life. With your capacity for loving, you have been starved. You will have your recompense some day; you will know what love is.'

She looked at him with reproachful eyes, but she did not speak.

'No,' he said, smiling, 'you don't know yet, dear. How should you know? Love has never stirred you yet. It is still a sealed book; you have never turned the page—the living page—and seen what is written there. You will turn it some day.'

She hurried on in front of him; she did not want him to see how his words moved her. There was a bewilder-

ing sense of distress, of happiness in her heart, which was beating wildly, and her lips were not quite steady. The path through the churchyard was so narrow that he could not walk by her side without treading on the graves.

At the gate he caught her up, and took her hand to say good-bye. Her head was bent, she could not look at him ; she caught her breath with a sob.

‘I shall come over to-morrow, before I go away,’ he said quietly.

‘Go away?’

‘The hounds are taken off to the Quantocks to-morrow,’ he explained. ‘I shall only be away a fortnight.’

‘A fortnight ! she gasped. She could not keep the disappointment out of her voice.

He smiled at her concern ; she was such a transparent little thing. He thought he could see through her changing moods as he could see through a child.

‘It will not be long ; it will soon pass. You will think of me sometimes, dear, while I am away?’

She did not answer him, but she lifted her eyes to his, and he read her answer there.

He stood for a moment beside her, looking down into her sweet, childish eyes as into a clear river, and seeing his own image reflected there. He might have spoken then. But he was in no hurry ; he had plenty of time. He went about his wooing with calm deliberateness. It was not in his nature to do anything in a hurry. He only said, ‘Good-bye, dear,’ and pressed the little hands he held, and mounted his horse and rode away.

Celia was hurt, wounded ; she thought he was playing with her. His words had tortured her, had burnt into her heart. A crowd of vague possibilities had flashed into her mind as he held her hands in his, and looked down into her eyes. When he had let them go she turned away with a shiver. She saw him turn the corner

of the road, by Black Willy's post. He did not once look back ; he rode straight on. Perhaps he could not trust himself.

Her pulses quivered and ached with something she could not understand, and there was a strange revolt and hunger in her heart. Was this love ? she asked herself fearfully, as she stood by the gate, with the leaves of the beech trees in the churchyard flinging the rain-drops in her face—this wild joy, this bitter-sweet hunger, this vague, mystical yearning ? She walked slowly down the church path, with the sweet, wild throbbing at her heart. Something seemed to have dropped out of her life while she stood in that dark porch with Geoffrey by her side, and something had come into it—something sweet and undefined, a subtle, mysterious joy,—a vague, mysterious sorrow.

## CHAPTER XIV

### THE BANNS OF MARRIAGE

GEOFFREY BLUETT had not said what time he would call at the Rectory the next day. Celia was in a flutter of excitement all the morning. Her father was indoors drinking before the service. He always drank heavily on the days when he was not hunting, and Sundays were no exception to the rule.

She thought Geoffrey might have come over to the morning service, but the big square pew belonging to the Bower was empty. Nat Snow was in his place in the churchwarden's pew under the tower, with his hard-faced old mother sitting stiff and erect beside him. Celia could see them, mother and son, every time she looked up. There was a big black board above the pew, inscribed with some prosy old legends concerning gifts and restorations, and other church matters, and it was signed Nathaniel Snow, churchwarden. Nat Snow's grandfather had been living when it was put up. It had always seemed to Celia that it was his monument, as the marble tablet with the sculptured urn above the Gallantry pew was the monument of the Bluetts.

She found herself vaguely wondering during the service what it would be like to sit in that tower pew, beneath that hateful old black board; and if the hard-



faced old woman would give up her seat to her. She took some grim satisfaction in thinking what it would cost the old woman to give up her seat—how she would suffer.

Celia was so full of this foolish thought that she did not notice a stir in the church; that from indifference and apathy, everyone's attention was suddenly arrested.

Parson Carmichael was reading out the banns of marriage. Celia did not catch the name of the man that was read out, but she caught the name of the girl.

'Susan Lake, spinster, of this parish.'

Susan Lake!

Her mind was still running on the old woman's discomfiture, when she would have to give up her place in the churchwarden's pew, and she glanced unconsciously across the church, and saw Mrs Snow's hard face flush, grow suddenly red beneath her Sunday bonnet, when Susan's name was read out. Nat changed countenance too, but he did not flush a deeper red; he could not very well turn redder. When the name of the dairy-maid his mother had discharged at a moment's notice was mentioned, the colour dropped out of his florid cheeks.

Perhaps he saw that Celia was watching him. He did not look up and meet her eyes again during the service, and when it was over he got up and walked out with his mother, before she had left off playing the people out of church. It did not strike her as being odd; she was glad enough not to have to walk down the path with him by her side. She remembered vaguely, there had been a disturbance of some kind when Susan was sent away from the farm in such a hurry. She had never heard, she had never inquired, the reason of her being sent away at a moment's notice.

'Who is Susan going to marry, papa?' she demanded

of her father the moment he had slipped off his surplice and come down the aisle.

'Who? Oh, that new fellow at the Red Deer! A nice connection for Nat,' the old man said, with a chuckle. 'A good thing for you, my girl, that it was settled before Susan took up with him.'

'Susan's marriage has got nothing to do with me,' Celia said, with some spirit.

'Oh, hasn't it! You can't get away from your relations, my dear. You've got about the choicest lot in Stoke, and now you've got a publican—a pretty black sheep, by all I hear. It isn't every man who'd take a girl from such a family. You take my advice, Celia, and marry him while you've got a chance. Don't let him cry off.'

'I'm sure Mr Snow is at liberty to cry off if he likes,' Celia said warmly, 'if he is ashamed of my family.'

She was hot and angry; she could not understand her father twitting her with her low connections. He never seemed to think she had any share in the Carmichaels. He always spoke of her as if she belonged to the Lakes; as if she were her mother's child, not his.

Nat Snow did not come over to the afternoon service, Mrs Snow came alone. Celia thought she looked stonier and stiffer than ever, when she saw her sitting beneath that black board alone. It gave her a sort of distinction. The church seemed to belong to her. Parsons might come and go, but the Snows would be churchwardens still.

When the service was half over, Celia looked up from the hymn she was playing, and saw Geoffrey walking up the aisle. She forgot all about the music, and broke down in the middle of a verse with a crash, and the congregation had to finish it without her.

She did not dare to look across the church, though she knew Geoffrey was sitting opposite to her, under the marble effigy of the Bluetts.

He waited for her in the porch when the service was

over, and walked back to the Rectory with her. His greeting seemed to her cold and formal ; he seemed to have forgotten what had passed the night before. Perhaps he had repented of having gone so far, and was going to be more guarded in future.

Celia was looking sweet and fresh and distracting enough in her pretty light Sunday gown to set any man off his guard. It was really a Sunday gown ; she could not afford to wear it on other days. There was a delicate colour on her cheeks, and the soft rings of black hair about her face only made it look fairer and more beautiful by contrast. Geoffrey thought, as he walked by her side down the church path, that he had never seen such a delicate curve of a girl's cheek ; he had never seen such a perfect mouth.

No detail of her girlish beauty was lost upon him ; it was while he was drinking it in with every sense that she told herself he was cold and formal. She had expected, after yesterday, something like demonstration, and instead, he walked silently by her side, watching her with his grave eyes.

Celia was shy and embarrassed, and her voice was a little reproachful.

'There was quite an excitement at church this morning,' she said, breaking the silence that was getting embarrassing. 'Somebody's banns were called. You would never guess whose.'

'No,' he said. 'So long as they were not yours, I should not care.'

Celia shivered. She thought by his tone he had heard. She went on talking gaily in self-defence, to ward off the dreaded revelation.

'It was Susan Lake's. You remember little Susan ? She was the same age as me ; people used to say we were alike, only Susan had black eyes. She is my cousin, you know.'

'I'm afraid I have no distinct recollection of Miss Susan,' he said, with a smile at her eagerness.

'She is not Miss Susan; she is only dairymaid at the Bower, and she is going to marry the man at the inn.'

'The new man at the Red Deer?' he asked, with sudden interest. 'Not a very good match for her, I should think, from all I hear.'

'No, perhaps not, but she knows best. I daresay she would rather get married than remain in service. She was always getting into trouble in service, and now she will be her own mistress.'

'Poor Susan!' he said; 'I hope she will not be disappointed.'

'I hope not,' Celia said rather defiantly. 'You see he will be a member of my family—a relation of mine—and I should be disappointed too, if he turned out bad.'

'Dear,' he said, turning to her with an air of protection not tinged with amusement, 'you must not talk this nonsense. The man is nothing to you—or the girl either. You are a Carmichael.'

'I am a Lake,' she said; 'my mother was a Lake. You would not have me ashamed of my mother's people?'

She was talking a little wildly. Her eyes were shining, and the colour on her cheeks had deepened.

'No,' he said, 'I would not have you ashamed of your mother's people; but there is no reason for you to drag them into your life, you have nothing in common with them. Take my advice, dear, and let Susan the dairymaid go her own way. Don't dwell too much on that connection. The time has come when Susan's path and yours naturally divide. Your mother ceased to be a Lake when she married your father; and you—one has only to look into your face and see that you are a Carmichael.'

He looked into her face as he spoke, and his pulse

quicken. He did not care whether she were a Lake or a Carmichael ; it did not matter to him. He did not stop to inquire whether she got her rich dark hair, with that dusky glimmer in it as the sunlight fell upon it, from a Lake or a Carmichael ; if her full scarlet lips, with that delightful curve that Eros himself might have envied, were the dowry of a dairymaid or a duchess. It was no dairymaid, it was the gods themselves who had given Celia her tall, shapely figure, with the delightful curves that his eyes loved to dwell upon—

‘ A daughter of the gods, divinely tall,  
And most divinely fair.’

She did not want anything, he thought, but just a little more knowledge of the world. No ; he would not have her know more of the world. Her ignorance of the world, her *naïveté*, were her especial charm. He had met a great many women in his wanderings who were more beautiful than Celia, who knew a great deal more ; but he had never met one who had the charm for him that she had. Perhaps it was her freshness, her ignorance ; he could not think where it came from, this piquante beauty that attracted him. Perhaps it was from the dairymaid after all.

Her father came up to them while they were lingering by the way, and he took Geoffrey into the house.

Celia sat in her old place in the window seat while the men talked. She was half hidden by the heavy curtain, but Geoffrey could see her profile, and the dainty curve of her throat, and the soft, dark rings of hair about her forehead, stirred by the sweetbriar wind that came in through the open casement.

There was a low sweetbriar hedge in the garden outside, and the wind blew over it laden with the sweet scent.

There was a thrush on it now, looking for berries, and calling out in his ridiculous way, 'Sweet-sweet-sweet, will-you-kiss-me-dear !'

The song of the thrush, and the scent of the sweet briar hedge, came into the room as the men sat talking. If Celia had not been sitting there, Geoffrey would have spoken to her father. He was sure of his consent, but he had old-fashioned notions about things being square. There was no hurry, he told himself. He could wait. He did not want to hurry his wooing. He would speak to him when he came back from that fortnight's hunting on the Quantocks.

The old man was loud in bewailing his fate at losing his beloved sport for two whole weeks. He would have gone to the Quantocks with the rest if he could have afforded it, if he had had horses and money. He would not have considered his parish. The selfish old Nimrod never let the care of his parish interfere with his pleasure.

'I suppose that foreign woman will be there with the rest ; she doesn't look as if she'd let a broken bone stand in her way,' he grumbled.

'The Princess Bordone has gone away, I believe ; gone off in her yacht for a cruise in the Mediterranean. At least that is what they told me when I called a day or two after the accident to inquire for her. She could not have been hurt so much as we thought, to get away so soon.'

Celia looked round quickly at Geoffrey's words ; they broke in upon her musings. She had forgotten all about the Princess until now.

'When did you call at the Bower ?' she asked abruptly.

'Two days after the accident, I believe—yes, on the third day ; I did not care to go earlier.'

'She could not have gone away in her yacht, then ; it only came back last night. I saw it coming round the

headland just as the dusk fell,' Celia said, in her straightforward way.

'Perhaps she did not wish to see me; it was natural, as the place happens to belong to me, I might have been spying about. Though I don't see why she should have invented an excuse.'

'She'd her reasons, my boy, you take my word for it. From what I hear, she's a bad lot. She didn't want you to go hanging around. A good deal goes on at the Bower that won't bear daylight. You've got hold of an adventuress, Squire, or I'm not parson of Stoke,' the old man said, with a chuckle.

He had been drinking deeply since the service, and his voice was thick. Not even the presence of his old pupil had been able to restrain him.

'An adventuress! what do you mean, papa?' Celia asked from the window seat.

'Oh, you are there, are you? I did not know you were there listening; never mind, my girl, what I mean. Princess or no Princess, she isn't the sort I'd like the women of my family to have much to do with. The less you know of that sort the better. If it hadn't been for her accident, she shouldn't have come under my roof.'

She behaved very rudely, papa, if that is what you mean. She never thanked you for taking her in; and she did not even ask me to call—and we her only neighbours.'

'She knew better!'

The old man winked across the table at Geoffrey as he spoke. Celia looked puzzled. She could not understand what her father meant, what Nat had meant when he said that the Princess was not good enough for her. Her mind had still the unsullied innocence of a child's. She thought all women were pure; but she did not know much about men.

'I think she is very beautiful,' she said warmly. 'She is the most beautiful woman I ever saw!'

'A dangerous gift, my girl, a dangerous gift. A jewel of gold in a swine's mouth,' the old man said, with a laugh that was distinctly unpleasant.

Celia got up with a shiver and walked out of the room. She was hot and angry, but she did not know why. She did not understand.

Geoffrey got up soon after, and followed her out into the cool, green garden. The twilight had fallen, and the night was warm and oppressive, and the moon was low. It was all so still and silent in the sweet Sabbath dusk, only a faint murmur of the evening breeze blowing across the heather.

'Let us walk in the road,' Celia said, opening the garden gate and stepping out into the lane. She could not bear the atmosphere of the house; it seemed charged with an evil she could not understand.

'What was that papa was saying about the Princess?' she asked him when they had walked a little way.

He did not answer for a minute. He looked down at her gravely; she was such a simple, ignorant child. When the sun sank behind the purple rim of the moor, it set upon her world; she knew nothing beyond it.

He shrugged his shoulders.

'There are all sorts of reports afloat about the lady who calls herself the "Princess Bordone,"' he said, 'but I daresay there is nothing in them; mere idle gossip. She is a foreigner, and unaccustomed to our ways. And she is very beautiful. When a beautiful woman is seen in the hunting field alone, when she has no natural protector, no lady friend with her, people are apt to talk.'

'There is Mr Elwood,' Celia said quickly.

'Mr Elwood is her steward. It is not usual in England for ladies to ride with their stewards. I



think, as your father says, it is quite as well she did not ask you to call at Gallantry. What you have done for her you would have done for any woman under the circumstances.'

'I am not sure I shall not call at the Bower when she comes back; it is only what I should expect people to do if I had met with an accident,' Celia said, with some spirit.

Now that she had no longer any reason to regard the Princess as a rival, she was ready to take her part.

'I think people are horrid to raise up stories because she has no one to look after her. If the Prince is dead, or away in Austria, she cannot be expected to shut herself up. Everyone knows she came here for the hunting.'

He smiled at her eager championship; he would not have her less generous and simple. He was not sure that he did not admire her spirit.

'The lady is away on a cruise, or going away,' he said, 'and when she comes back she will have forgotten all about the accident, I daresay. I think your sympathy would be wasted. Wait, dear, wait, put off your visit—and—and perhaps—some day—we will go to Gallantry together.'

Celia readily promised assent. She did not know what was in his mind when he asked her to wait.

To another woman—a woman of the world—his words could have had but one meaning.

## CHAPTER XV

### AN UNWILLING BRIDE

SUSAN LAKE came up to the Rectory the next day. Her errand was to the Rector, but she came to the kitchen door. The Rector was out on Pharoah, his broken-kneed old hunting pony; he was giving Damsel a rest. There was a meet of the foxhounds down in the bottom, and for want of better sport he had ridden old Pharoah over to the meet.

Celia heard Susan's voice in the kitchen; it was raised rather high, and it sounded as if she were weeping.

She could not think why Susan was weeping. A girl whose banns had been called in church, who was going to be married, had nothing to weep for.

Janet was scolding her it seemed, at least her voice was raised high and shrill as if something had gone wrong.

'Get the parson to stop the banns indeed! what next?' she was saying, when Celia opened the kitchen door and appeared upon the scene.

Susan was sitting on a low stool by the hearth, with her apron to her eyes. Her hat was off, and her coarse black hair had fallen down over her shoulders. She was rocking herself backwards and forwards, and sobbing behind her apron, and Janet was standing over her.

'Who wants to stop the banns?' Celia asked, pausing in the middle of the kitchen floor, and looking from one to the other.

Susan looked up at the sound of her voice, and then Celia saw that the girl's eyes were red, and her face was swollen with crying.

'Oh, I'm glad you've come! I know you'll help me, Cic'ly,' Susan sobbed.

'Of course I'll help you if I can; but what is all this fuss about? Don't you want to be married?'

'Want to be married!' the girl said, throwing up her hands; 'I'd rather be buried than marry the likes of he!'

'Oh—h,' Celia said, drawing a deep breath, and a faint colour stealing over her face. 'You—you've found out you don't like him, then, after all? Pity you didn't find it out before you put the banns up.'

'Like him! I never did like him. I always hated him!'

'Then why did you say you would marry him?'

'I never said I would marry him! If he says that I said that, he tells a lie!' the girl said passionately.

'But you let him put the banns up—'

'I let him! I never knew nought about it until one of the chaps at the Bower brought me down word yesterday. You might ha' knocked me down wi' a feather when I heard I'd been called in church.'

'What will you do, Susan?'

'I dunno; I came to ask the parson to stop 'em, to take 'em down,' the girl said, breaking afresh into tears. 'I'd rather die than I'd marry Luke Field!'

'Not so easily said as done,' old Janet said grimly. 'I never heard o' banns being taken down when they was onst put up.'

Celia looked from one to the other.

'You'll ask your father for me, won't you, Cic'ly? Suppose it were yourself—'

Celia shuddered.

'I don't know that papa can do anything,' she said; 'I'm afraid it'll have to go on—unless someone stands up in church and forbids them. Can't you get someone to forbid them?'

Susan moaned.

'They are all agen me!' she sobbed. 'They are all in league with he; granny and Tom—Tom's at the bottom o't. He's at the Red Deer night and day. He an' Luke have a-made it up between 'em.'

'There's Joe Martin—you used to be fond of Joe, Susan; wouldn't he interfere?'

The girl flushed crimson.

'I'd rather die than ask him!' she said passionately.

Janet shrugged her shoulders. 'Seems to me you'll have to make the best of it,' she said shortly. 'You'll have a good home an' a fine business. I've heerd that the trade at the Red Deer has looked up wonderful since Luke Field tooked it. An' he ain't a bad sort, from what I've heerd tell. He's pretty flush o' money, too, by all accounts, an' has a couple of as fine milking cows as any in the parish, let alone the pigs.'

There was a good deal in favour of Susan's admirer. Celia could not understand why the girl was so unwilling.

'Perhaps there's somebody else, Susan,' she said, hesitating.

'There's no one else,' said the girl sullenly; 'if the parson can't stop it, there's no one else. It'll have to go on. If I marry Luke, something 'll happen; mark my words—something 'll happen.'

She began to roll up her dark hair into a coil as she spoke. There was a sort of desperation in the way she twisted it up and stuck the hairpins into it.

Celia watched her with a strange fascination. 'You must have let him think you cared for him—just a little

—he wouldn't have put up the banns if he didn't think you cared—' she began, when the girl stopped her.

'I never let him think I cared. I always told him I hated him. I hadn't known him a week before he asked me to marry him, an' I said I'd die first! He wanted to kiss me when I went in once wi'—wi'—never mind who wi'—and I gie him a smack in the face. He said he'd ha' his revenge, he'd break my spirit for me—an'—an' this is his revenge.'

Janet looked grave.

'You've got yourself to thank for it,' she said; 'this comes o' going into the Red Deer drinking o' nights. When I was a gal, I should never ha' thought o' sitting about in tap-rooms, drinking wi' men folk. The talk that goes on there isn't fit for gals to hear. It seems to me you've brought it all on yourself. You've nothing but your own good will to thank for it.'

'Who says I sit about in tap-rooms o' nights?' Susan demanded hotly.

'Never mind who says. There's a little bird that tells tales. If all he says is true, you'd better hold your tongue an' put up wi' it. There are worse things than being the wife of an honest man.'

Whatever Janet might mean by this dark speech, the girl jumped up in a passion.

'I don't know what you've heard, an' I don't care!' she said defiantly; 'if that drunken old beast, Eli, has been telling tales, I'll wring his old neck for him! You tell him from me to look out; if he comes in my way, it'll be the worse for him!'

Susan was weeping no longer. She was angry and defiant; her black eyes were blazing with passion, and her cheeks were crimson.

Celia looked at her wonderingly, and she moved a little farther away. Susan's violence frightened her. She

was not like the simple village girl she had run races with across the moor not so long ago.

‘What do you mean by coming here wi’ your threats?’ Janet said angrily. ‘If all I hear be true, you beant fit to bide talking wi’ missy here. You’d better clear out. If you don’t want the banns a-called, you’d better say so in church, ‘clare it, as the book says. It strikes me, with all your whimperin’, you’d know better than to go crying out when you’ve got a chance o’ being made an honest woman of.’

‘An honest woman of! What d’ye mean?’ Susan demanded, reddening furiously.

‘Oh, you are a precious innercent, I dessay; go an’ ask the old missus at Letcombe for a karakter, an’ her’il pretty soon let you know what I mean.’

The girl jumped up, white and trembling. The red, healthy colour had dropped out of her face, and a startled look had come into her dark eyes, and her loose lips were drawn down and quivering.

‘Who wants a karakter?’ she said defiantly. ‘Luke Field don’t want no karakter. When a gal is going to marry a man wi’ money, an’ land, an’ cows, an’ pigs—an’ a shay-cart—she don’t want no character!’

Susan drew her shawl about her—she was wearing a shawl, though it was a warm summer day—and took up her bundle.

‘Good-bye,’ she said to Celia, when she got to the door. She passed Janet without a word, holding her head high and straightening herself as she went out of the kitchen door. ‘Don’t bother the parson about the banns. I’ve got to go through with it, I expect; it’s too late to draw back.’

‘Draw back!’ Janet shrieked after her, as she went down the garden path; ‘her knows better than to draw back! Her’s glad enough to get a chance o’ being married to an honest man, bless yer! Her’s only shammin’!’

The girl did not make any reply; she walked quickly down the path. When she reached the garden gate, she looked back to see if Celia was following her, but she did not pause; she hurried down the hill with her bundle, her face working, and a dreadful swelling at her heart.

‘Oh, my God! my God!’ she murmured. ‘She knows—everyone knows.’

Celia stood at the kitchen door watching the girl going down the hill.

‘I can’t think why you are so hard upon Susan,’ she said, as the gate swung to behind her. ‘She seems in dreadful trouble.’

‘Ay,’ said the old woman grimly, ‘very like. She’s got no one but herself to thank for it. Stop the banns, indeed! When she ought to be thankful to an honest man for marrying her.’

‘Why should she be thankful when she hates the man, when he put up the banns without her consent?’

The old woman looked at her young mistress and shook her head.

‘Don’t you ask no questions, my honey. Take my word for it, Susan Lake’s not the sort for you to have much to do with. Don’t forget, child, that you are a Carmichael.’

There was nothing more said about stopping the banns after this. When they were read in due course the following Sunday morning, Celia almost hoped—she quite expected—to see Susan get up in her place in the choir and make a scene; but she was disappointed. Beyond changing colour from red to white, and white to red, when her name was read out in church, Susan made no sign.

Celia did not know why her eyes travelled down the aisle to the churchwarden’s pew under the tower, where Mrs Snow sat in solitary state beneath the family monu-

ment. Nat was not at church to-day ; she sat in the great pew alone, stony and upright, with the black beads on her bonnet glistening in the sunshine. Celia did not know why she hated the sight of that glittering headgear in the dark corner under the tower, why she had taken such an insane aversion to it. She waited in the church until Mrs Snow had gone down the path.

Susan lingered behind the rest ; she did not leave her place in the choir till most of the congregation had filed out of church. She was waiting in the porch behind the rest when Celia came out.

‘So you’ve made up your mind, Susan?’ she said, as they stood together in the dark porch.

The girl nodded.

‘It’s no use making a fuss,’ she said sullenly.

‘When is the wedding to be? Have you fixed the day?’

‘I dunno. I haven’t thought about it yet ; there’s another asking.’

‘But you ought to know when it’s to be. Have you got your things ready?’

Susan shook her head, and her eyes filled with tears.

‘I’ve got nothing to get ready,’ she said. ‘If he marries me he’ll have to take me as I am.’

‘When do you leave the Bower?’ Celia asked.

‘Next week some time, when the missus comes back. Her’s away in her yacht, but her’s coming back soon. I can’t leave till her’s back.’

‘Is she better? Is her arm all right?’

‘I dunno naught about her!’ Susan said sullenly. ‘It’s no use your asking me about her. If you want to know you’d better go and find out for yoursel’. I’ve got into trouble enough wi’ just mentioning her name. She pays me my wages, an’ that’s all I know about her.’

The girl walked down the path. She did not wait for Celia to answer.



It would seem from this that she had not got on very well in her place. She was coming away in disgrace. There was generally trouble for poor Susan when she left her places. Perhaps marrying was the best thing for her.

## CHAPTER XVI

### THE WEDDING GOWN

SUSAN LAKE came up to the Rectory again before the end of the week. She was carrying a bundle in her arms. She was hot and flushed with walking up the hill, and her eyes were shining.

'I've left the Bower,' she said to Celia, when she came in, 'an' the missus have given me a dress—a wedding dress.'

'A wedding dress!'

'Yes, a beauty! I thought you'd like to see it, an' I've brought it up. Luke's cart's going to fetch my things to-morrow, but I brought the gown away with me.'

Susan opened the bundle as she spoke, and shook out the dress. Celia gave a little cry as she shook it out.

'Oh!'

'I knew you'd like to see it!' the girl said, flushing with pride and pleasure. 'Isn't it a beauty?'

'I never saw anything so lovely!' Celia said, with something like emotion.

It really was a lovely dress. A soft, mist-coloured grey silk, with a sheen on it like steel flashing in the sunlight, and the bodice was covered with soft white lace. Celia had never seen anything like it. She had never been in any assembly where women wear lovely dresses.

'The Princess gave you this,' she said, 'this—to be married in! Why, it must be one of her Court dresses, and there is not a soil upon it. Whatever could have made her give you such a dress as this?'

Celia could not understand any woman giving a dairy-maid such a dress. There was a train to the skirt nearly a couple of yards in length, and it was trimmed with lace and little silver spangles that flashed in the sunlight. It was only a gown that could have been worn for a very special occasion—or on the stage.

But Celia did not know anything about the stage. The only play-acting she had ever seen was at a booth at Barnstaple Fair. The ladies there, she remembered, wore trains and spangles.

She was not thinking of the stage, however, as she turned over Susan's beautiful gown.

'Whatever will you do with it?' she asked.

'Do with it? Why, wear it to be married in, to be sure!' Susan said, in an injured voice.

'You can't wear it as it is—with a train—and a low body,' Celia said, or gasped, rather; the sight of these glories took away her breath.

'I suppose it can be altered,' Susan said sulkily. 'There's a lot in the train that could be cut up for a new body, and there are some bits in the pocket. The Princess said I should find enough in the pocket an' in the train to alter it wi'.'

She proceeded to turn out the pocket as she spoke; there was quite a bundle of loose bits of silk and lace and lining. While she was turning it out, Celia looked at the name on the waistband. The gilt letters of the name on the band had caught her eye—'Lablache, Costumier Le Comédie Française.' The dress was of French make, then, which accounted for the frippery and spangles about it.

'Who will you get to alter it?' she asked the girl.

She was thinking there was no dressmaker in the village who could be trusted with such a task.

'I shall get Luke to drive me into Barnstaple,' Susan answered readily. 'I shall have to get some gloves to wear wi' it—an' a veil.'

'A veil!'

'Yes; why not? You couldn't expect me to wear a hat wi' a gown like that?'

'I shouldn't wear the gown at all,' Celia said decidedly.

'Not after it's gived to me? 'Course I shall wear it! an' a pair o' kid gloves—white ones—an' a wreath o' roses—an' a veil. I'll let people see what's what. They sha'n't talk about me for nowt!' Susan said defiantly.

'Who's been talking about you?'

'Oh, Joe Martin, an' the rest.'

'What have they been saying?'

'Lies!'

The girl's face was white and lowering, and there was a sullen note of defiance in her voice.

'I thought Joe Martin was fond of you once, Susan. He used to be always waiting for you in the churchyard after service. I've often seen him waiting in the porch for you to come out. Have you quarrelled with him?'

The colour leapt up into Susan's face, and she dashed something from her eyes, it might have been tears, and her breast was heaving.

'What had I got to quarrel with him for? He was never anything to me!' she said fiercely.

'Oh, yes, he was, Susan. Everyone could see he was fond of you. He wouldn't have waited about the churchyard on Sundays, when all the other men were drinking at the Red Deer, if he were not fond of you.'

'Pretty fondness, to believe a pack o' lies an' take himself off wi'out a word! I'll let him see that there are others as good as he in the world—that I'm not breaking my heart for he!'

Susan proceeded to fold up her wedding gown as she was speaking. Her hands were trembling—they were big, coarse, damp hands—and wherever she touched the pretty, light silk she left a damp stain. The tears in her eyes, that she had not been able to keep back, brimmed over and fell on the dress as she folded it up. She would never have got it back into the handkerchief she had brought it in if Celia had not helped her to fold it up. What should a dairymaid know about folding up a Court gown?

The girl went away with her treasure; she dried her eyes, and carried it away with a proud sense of possession that seemed to reconcile her to her fate.

‘I’m sure she’ll be sorry for what she’s doing; she ought to have married Joe Martin; Joe’s worth a dozen of that horrid man at the inn,’ Celia said to Janet when she told her about the wedding dress, and how Susan had flared up when she spoke of her old lover, Joe Martin.

Janet shook her head.

‘Joe Martin won’t have nowt to do wi’ her, an’ small blame to him. If Susan hadn’t a-been wild an’ giddy, she might ha’ married Joe. He would ha’ made an honest woman of her. Her’s got no one to thank but hersel’.’

When Celia went back to the room where Susan’s wedding dress had been unfolded, she saw some bits of the silk that had fallen out of the pocket on the floor, and beside them was a piece of folded paper.

She gathered them up off the ground, the paper with them. She unfolded the paper, thinking it might be a bill, the dressmaker’s bill. The dressmaker at Barnstaple who made her frocks generally put the bill for the making in the pocket, when she sent the dress home, with any bits of material that might be left.

Celia was rather curious to see what a Parisian dressmaker would charge for the making of such a dress.

But it was not a dressmaker's bill ; it was a letter.

It was in a man's handwriting, and it was dated only four months back. Something in the writing struck Celia. She was sure she had seen it before.

There was no address, no heading at the top of the page, only the date.

'DEAR LITTLE GIRL,' it began,—'The troublesome business is settled at last, it only remains for the papers to be signed. You must get off the last fortnight of your engagement ; plead illness—fatigue—anything you like. There is so much to be thought of—to get ready—and we ought to be down there in July at the latest. I hope you are looking forward to your new part. There is absolutely no risk ; and if there were, you would be the last woman in the world to shrink from it. Adieu, my Princess.  
F. E.'

It was a hastily-scribbled note, written on a half sheet of paper, and bore no other signature than the initials F. E.

Celia read the letter over twice with a growing sense of bewilderment, and a vague feeling of dismay.

It was not until she had read it over for the third time that she thought she saw a glimmer of light through it.

She was sure, she was quite sure, that the letter was written by the man who called himself the steward. There was a reason for his assuming this disguise, and the woman he addressed was playing a part. There was no doubt, from the tone of the letter, that the man was her lover. There was some truth in the reports about the new tenant of The Bower after all.

Celia remembered how she had taken the woman's part, and she crumpled the letter up in her hand. She thought at first she would destroy it ; it would be a very awkward thing to fall into anyone else's hands. She

would not let her father see it on any account ; she did not know why she shrank from letting her father see it. He was prejudiced enough against the tenant of The Bower as it was. If he got hold of the letter, he would be talking about it in his cups ; it would be all over Exmoor that the lady had run away with her lover.

On second thoughts, Celia decided to lock it up in her desk. She had no love-letters of her own to lock up—she had never had a love-letter in her life—so she locked up in her sweet-scented, camphor-wood desk the love-letter of another woman ;—she locked it up with a sigh.

The day after the banns of the landlord of the Red Deer had been read for the third time, Susan Lake was married. The church was filled with a motley crowd to witness the ceremony. All the women and girls in the village crowded into the church to see the wedding, while the men stood about in the yard, and the children played and shouted to each other across the graves. It was a noisy, ribald crowd ; there was no one present to preserve order or decency. The women pressed into the church bareheaded, with their aprons on, and their sleeves tucked up, just as they had come away from their washing-tubs, or their work in the fields ; some of them had children in their arms, or clinging to their skirts.

They talked aloud in the church, and exchanged jokes with the men outside ; there was no one to keep them in order.

Nat Snow, the churchwarden, was not among the number.

‘He knows better than to show his face here !’ one of the women said, with a laugh, when his name was mentioned.

The men outside in the yard were mostly customers of the Red Deer. It was open house to-day at the inn ; there was no money to be taken. Everyone could drink his fill.

The bridegroom came up with his friends to the minute ; but the bride was late. She was so late that Celia began to think she would not come at all, that she had changed her mind. The man standing at the altar rails among his friends grew uneasy ; more than once he looked at his watch, and his coarse, freckled face grew a brick-dust red, and his brow lowered. Celia did not wonder at Susan's repulsion ; she could not understand a girl marrying him.

The bride came at last.

There was a dull roar, a derisive cheer in the yard outside, as Susan came up the path in her bridal finery.

She looked hot and red and flustered as she came up the aisle with Tom. She had thought better of the veil and the wreath of roses ; at least, the roses were there, but they were on a hat, a whole gardenful, and some white feathers besides.

The beautiful gown had been shorn of its trimmings. A plain, tight bodice replaced the corsage of lace and spangles, and set Susan's ample figure off to perfection. She had never looked so handsome before as she looked to-day in her wedding-gown, with the roses on her hat vying with the other deeper roses on her cheeks, and her beautiful, brown eyes shining. She looked round at the assembled crowd defiantly as she came up the aisle, and held her head high. Two girls of the village walked behind her, and Tom gave her away. This was all her humble train.

In the middle of the service Susan broke down into a fit of hysterical weeping, and the girls who stood behind her began to giggle. The sound of their suppressed laughter stopped her sobbing, and she looked round with angry defiance in her eyes, and the tears wet on her cheeks. They were still wet when she passed down the aisle, and her mouth was trembling. The men waiting about outside in the yard, and the children



who had been leaping over the tombstones, pressed forward when the bride and bridegroom came out of church, and cheered them, and the women flung rice in their faces.

The bride flushed and trembled as she hung on her husband's arm. He had to drag her along as she passed through the jeering crowd. The man looked white and angry. He was a sullen, ill-looking fellow, and his brow lowered, and his thin lips tightened ominously as he dragged the trembling girl through the excited crowd. The showers of rice fell thick and fast about them as they reached the church gate, and as it was chiefly directed at their faces, it almost took the nature of an assault.

'Here, enough of that!' the bridegroom said, turning savagely round upon his assailants.

He did not look the sort of fellow to be trifled with, even on his wedding day; and the men stood aside, and the women stopped their laughter, and made way for the bridal pair to pass unmolested down the village street.

Before the week was over there was a sad story in the village. The new landlady of the Red Deer appeared in the bar with a discoloured mark on her cheek, and her handsome eyes, the customers remarked, were often red and swollen with crying. Rumours were afloat that misunderstandings had already arisen between the newly-married pair. The rumours were not without foundation. Before Susan had been the bride of a month, before her brief honeymoon was over, Luke Field had turned her out of doors.

Susan had been recognised by Eli late one night, after the inn was closed, coming up the hill from the village. She had a shawl muffled round her head, and her pace was hurried. He called out a good-night to her as she passed the Rectory gate, but she had not

paused to reply; she had hurried on. She was going in the direction of old Nance Lake's cottage at Wytchanger.

'Something's wrong with Field's wife,' he said to Janet when he went in, after he had locked the gate for the night; 'her's a-gone tearin' up the hill with her hair a-flying — an' a-screechin' an' moanin' like a mazed thing!'

This was a slight exaggeration of the old man's. By the light of his lantern he had caught sight of Susan's flushed face as she hurried past him up the hill, and he had noticed that her eyes were red with crying, and that once or twice she gave a low sob.

Janet shook her head. 'It's a bad business,' she said; 'I never thought no good would come of it. I expect he's been knocking her about again, an' she hev a-run away. Her's got nowhere to go to but the ould woman at Wytchanger—it's no good her comin' here.'

Janet's surmise was not far wrong; Susan had gone up the hill to her grandmother's. The old woman had taken her in, and given her shelter for the night; but the next morning, when it was yet daybreak, she had brought the trembling, reluctant girl back to the village to her husband's door.

She had given the landlord of the Red Deer a bit of her mind when she brought Susan back, and, according to the rumours that were rife in the village, she had laid one of her evil spells upon him. The big, surly brute had taken his wife back sulkily, and he had undertaken not to turn her out of doors again. The promise had been extracted from him by a threat, a menace, rather.

Old Nance had used her reputation for witchcraft to intimidate him. She went back through the village, chuckling. Janet stopped her as she passed the Rectory gate. She had waited there to catch her.

'Well, have he took her back?' she asked eagerly.

'Ee's boun' to take her back, 'ee's her lawful husband, arnt 'ee?' the old woman said, with an evil leer.

'I dunno about that,' Janet said, throwing her head up with a sniff; 'it depends on the sort o' man he is.'

Old Nance chuckled. 'Folks can say what they will; he's a-married her,' she said defiantly. 'He can't go agen that.'

Janet surveyed her steadily. 'He'll have Nat Snow to reckon wi', I guess,' she said shortly.

A gleam of anger, of shame, rose up in old Nance's wrinkled face, and her black eyes blazed. 'Let he alone, he'll have his reward,' she said fiercely. 'There's a day o' reckonin' comin'; but as for that fool up there'—and she jerked a lean forefinger, that was crooked like a bird's claw, in the direction of the Red Deer—'he knowed what to expect when he married her; it were made worth his while—the Gallantry folk made it worth his while. The gal wor one too many for 'em, an' they got Luke to look arter her, to keep her from blabbing. If he turns her to doors agen, he'll ha' the Gallantry folk to reckon wi',—an' he'll ha' me.'

The old woman gave a low chuckle as she uttered this ambiguous threat, and hobbled quickly up the hill. Janet heard her muttering to herself as she went, and she turned away with a shiver.

'I'd rather reckon wi' the Gallantry folk than wi' t'ould Nance, I guess,' she said to herself, as she slammed the yard gate to behind her.

## CHAPTER XVII

### VILLAGE LIES

GEOFFREY BLUETT was away longer than he had expected. Urgent business called him up to town, and cut short his hunting on the Quantocks. The rumour of Celia's engagement had reached him on the eve of his leaving Stoke. He could not believe that Celia would have given him that answer—that she would have said there was no reason why he should not come—if there had been any truth in it.

The report, nevertheless, rankled in his mind all the time he was away. He was sincere in his resolve to ask her to be his wife ; but with that report ever in his mind, he kept silence. He would see her face to face, he told himself, and hear the truth from her own lips. It needed all his self-command to keep him from writing to her and setting the question at rest.

And Celia? She put the usual construction on his silence ; she thought he had forgotten her. He had learned the truth that she had tried to conceal ; her duplicity had not availed her ; he had learnt the truth for himself, and he had gone away in scorn and anger.

She did not blame him for leaving her. She was hurt, humiliated, but she told herself it was no more than she deserved.

As the soft, mellow September days went by, and the

autumn deepened on Exmoor, the hope in her heart died out, and the dreaded future loomed darker and nearer. Every whispering breeze of autumn that swept over the moor bore with it a message of sadness and despair. The air was warm and still, but the purple had died off the heather, and there were russet patches on the hills where the early frosts had browned the fern.

The wedding had been definitely fixed to take place directly after Christmas, and preparations for it were already being made at the Rectory. Janet would give the Rector no peace until he had driven her over to Barnstaple to make some purchases for the bride's trousseau. She arrived back in triumph with a big bundle of calico, and needles and thread, and set to work upon it the same evening.

Celia shuddered when she saw the calico unrolled. The sight of it, and the snipping and sewing that was going on, filled her with inexpressible dread and loathing. It seemed to bring the dreaded time nearer.

There was no hope for her anywhere, she told herself—no escape. Geoffrey had failed her, and there was no one to help her.

Her father lived only for himself. He had cared for nothing but sport and outdoor things all his life; he had never considered her; he would not put his hand out to help her. Besides, he had set his heart upon the wedding.

Nat Snow had so much power over him; he could turn him at his will. There was an understanding between them. They had worked into each other's hands so long—at least, the churchwarden had worked, and the Rector had been a passive tool in his hands. The Snows had managed the church lands so many years—there was a good deal of land in the parish owned by the Church, Gallantry Combe, and acres of wild moorland that had recently been brought into cultivation—that

they seemed to belong to them by right. Things had gone so far that the inmates of the Rectory were as much under the thumb of the churchwarden as the parish; he was master there, more than the old man, who, when he was at home, was seldom sober, who sat half the night maudlin over his cups. Nat's step seemed to have grown firmer, Celia fancied, since Geoffrey had gone away; he did not even pause to knock at the Rectory door now, when he paid his daily visit to his betrothed; he seemed to think the whole place belonged to him.

'Remember, I am not going to wait longer than Christmas,' he said to her on one of these visits, when she had tried to slip out of the room. 'There will be no running away then.'

'No,' she said. She drew a deep breath, and the colour dropped out of her cheeks. She did not see the angry flush on his face.

'Why do you shrink from it?' he said. 'If you knew how I am counting the days! It is not very long to wait now—not three months—the time will soon pass—and then—'

He took her in his arms, and kissed her.

'Don't let us talk of it,' she said; 'not at present; the time will pass soon enough. I have got papa to think of now. I don't know how he will get on without me—'

'He will get on very well,' Nat said, with a laugh. 'He will have Janet to look after him.'

He glanced at the table where the old man sat drinking as he spoke. It did not seem that he would miss her—that he would miss anything—if he could drink—drink—drink all day. He wanted nothing else. He would get on just as well without her.

She made an appeal to him one night after Nat had left, when her endurance had been taxed more than she could bear. After Nat had left her at the door, she went

back to the window seat with her heart swelling within her, and began to cry. She forgot the presence of the old man ; she threw herself on the seat, and laid her head on the sill of the window, and began to sob convulsively. She did not moan and cry out like her cousin Susan ; she sobbed quietly, though her life seemed breaking within her.

The old man at the table heard her sobbing, and he took up the lamp, and went over to the window seat to look at her. Celia was not one of the crying sort. He thought something had happened to her, that she had quarrelled with her lover.

‘What’s the matter, lass?’ he said, not unkindly.

‘Nothing—nothing that can be helped, papa,’ she sobbed.

‘If it can’t be helped, there’s no good crying about it. Dry your eyes, child, and go to bed. It won’t look so bad, whatever it is, to-morrow morning.’

Celia moaned ; she did not answer him. She thought it would look quite as bad the next morning ; it would look worse ; it would be a day nearer.

‘Is it about Nat?’ the old man asked suspiciously.

Celia was long in answering ; he had to repeat his question.

‘Yes,’ she said, almost inaudibly.

‘You’ve been listening to the gossip about Susan Lake—all lies, a pack of village lies—not a word of truth in it ! And if it were true, it’s got nothing to do with you. A man’s not like a girl—you must take Nat as you find him.’

‘I—I have not heard anything about Susan,’ Celia said, flushing. ‘I don’t know what you mean, papa.’

‘All the better,’ the Rector said roughly. ‘And I should recommend you not to inquire. You are a deuced lucky girl, that’s all I know, to get Nat Snow for a husband ! You can’t afford to be too particular.’

Celia did not understand what he meant by that allusion to Susan; the village scandal, that was on everybody's lips, had not reached her. She did not know that Nat Snow had been the lover of his mother's dairymaid before he was her lover, that Susan's rustic charms had moved him first, that it was only when Susan was out of reach—when she had been sent away from Letcombe in disgrace—that he had come courting her.

The story of his low amour had not reached Celia's ears; she had not troubled herself to inquire into his past. She would not have asked him any questions about it for the world. His secrets were his own; they had nothing to do with her.

'It's about Nat I want to speak to you, papa. I made a mistake when I promised to marry him,' she said faintly; 'I—I did not know what I was saying—I did not understand—'

Her miserable eyes travelled over her father's face as she spoke, seeking for some promise of help or succour, but she saw none.

'I don't know what you mean by not knowing your own mind,' he said angrily. 'I only warn you not to play fast and loose with Nat Snow; he's not the sort to be trifled with.'

'I don't wish to trifle with him, papa. I—I only want him to give me back my promise—' she sobbed. She could not help sobbing, there was something clutching at her throat.

'Give you back your word!' the parson repeated hoarsely. 'Do you know what you are saying, girl? You've promised Nat Snow to marry him, and marry him you will! Don't let me hear any more nonsense about not understanding what you were saying. You understood well enough! If you've found out since he isn't exactly to your mind, you must make the best of him; only don't let Nat hear any infernal nonsense



about giving you back your promise! you don't know the Snows if you think they ever give up what they set their hearts upon. If it's a bit of land, or a horse, or a woman, they get it, cost what it will—they go through fire and water, but they get it.'

In his rage and anger he had no pity for her; he struck his hand heavily down on the oak table as he finished speaking, and set all the silver cups and glasses rattling. He had no need to threaten her; every word he said had stabbed.

She got up unsteadily and went over to the door. 'Then there is no help?' she said under her breath.

A sound of scorn broke from the old man. 'There's no way out of it, I tell you!' he said, and he struck the table again heavily with his hand and set the cups rattling.

Celia crept upstairs in the dark, with the jingling of those hateful silver cups in her ears, and a dreadful hand clutching at her throat.

There was no help anywhere.

## CHAPTER XVIII

### UNDER THE ROWAN TREE

‘With his brow, bay and tray, my lads—  
And four upon the top!’

THE accident that had happened to the beautiful tenant of Gallantry Bower did not long interfere with her hunting.

Before the season was over she was again seen on her thoroughbred in the hunting field. She still carried her arm in a sling, or, at least, it was fastened to her side, but it did not interfere with her riding.

It did not seem that anything would interfere with her riding. She sat her horse like no other woman in the field. She rode with an easy, careless grace, flying over the heather, taking gates and hedges without any apparent effort, clearing everything in her way with a coolness and dash that took the heart of every susceptible Nimrod in the hunting field.

The men admired her plucky riding more than the women. There was something bizarre in it. Other women who rode over Exmoor after the staghounds had as fine a seat, and rode as fearlessly, but they had not the lithe, willowy grace of the Princess Bordone, or her hand with a horse. Perhaps that was where her secret lay. She had ‘a hand’ with a horse that no other woman in the field had. She did not seem to require to touch it; it flew beneath her, obeying her lightest movement, carrying her over everything like a bird, going straight and refusing nothing; and all the while

she sat cool and smiling and indifferent. If it had not been for that treacherous bit of ground at Black Willy's post, and the beast had not rolled over upon her, she never could have been dislodged.

'She rides like the old fellow himself!' had been the remark of more than one *habitué* of the hunt the first day the Princess rode with the field.

The Master had come up and spoken to her on that occasion—it was not often that a princess rode on Exmoor—and the Secretary of the hunt expressed a hope that they should have some good sport, and the huntsman took off his cap and marshalled his hounds for her benefit. No one knew anything about her, but people did not inquire closely into her antecedents. That she was an Austrian princess was the received opinion; but she spoke English perfectly. There were reports afloat of her fabulous wealth; no one knew if they were well founded. There was a mystery attached to her; but that was no drawback. People love a mystery; it gave a certain fascination to her. Young, beautiful, with boundless wealth, and pluck enough to ride as a bird flies, her name was a good deal mentioned through the season on Exmoor. Wherever it was mentioned, it was with outspoken admiration by the men; whatever the difficulty might be about her, there was no doubt about her beauty and her pluck.

The women were shy of her from the first; but she fraternised with the hunting men. The Master often rode with her, and the huntsman always took off his cap when she rode up; a good many hunting men spoke to her, or bowed to her on the field, and the rest stared and admired, but the women looked at her coldly as she galloped by.

The Princess did not mind their cold looks; she did not seem to heed them.

The steward, Elwood, seldom rode with her now;

his presence had often been remarked in the hunting field, in the early part of the season—his black-browed, scowling face, and his slouching figure. He had given himself airs at first, as if the whole moor belonged to him, or, at least, as if the Princess, that all the men were raving about, belonged to him. He had scowled when other men came up and spoke to her, and rode across the heather by her side. He had not concealed his ill-humour—his jealousy—and now he had taken himself off. A groom rode behind her now, and the men had their say without any black looks and muttered oaths.

The presence of the steward had been some protection; it had shielded her from remark—remark that was not always kind. There were always people at every meet ready to watch her, to catch her off her guard, and draw their own conclusions. She was far too handsome—her eyes were much too bright—and that knot of ruddy gold hair gleaming in the sunlight beneath her hat was too conspicuous, for her to go riding across the moor with no other escort than a far-off groom.

Celia saw her drive up to the meet a week or two after the return of the hounds from the Quantocks. Nat Snow had driven Celia over to the meet in his dog-cart; it was her first visit to Cloutsham, and the brilliant scene on the Ball was new and strange to her.

Every lover of Exmoor knows Cloutsham Ball, a grassy eminence that commands a landscape, as far as the eye can reach, of rolling purple slopes and wide plains of yellowish greens and greys, with here and there a patch of russet. A mist hung over Dunkery, and fleecy clouds, that threatened rain, were coming in from the sea, but there was sunshine overhead.

While the huntsman was drawing the Horner covers below, and the hounds whined and fretted in their kennels, at the farm not a stone's throw away, the field

chatted in groups. While they were still chatting, and the sun shining overhead, the Princess Bordone drove up. Her horse had gone on with a groom the night before, and it was standing, sleek and shining, arching its neck and pawing the ground, when she came into the field.

Everybody had been admiring it for the last half hour. There was not such another horse in the field.

The Princess Bordone drove up in a high dog-cart, with a smart groom behind her. People had leisure to look at her as she whipped her horse up the steep incline and drove through the gate in her splendid style. The crowd fell away to make room for her, the men smiling and taking off their hats, and the women tightening their lips.

There was a distinct commotion in the field, an undercurrent of audible whispering, as she drove past. People were remarking that she was handsomer than ever; her beauty was more brilliant, more defiant, and her driving was more reckless. The men who were waiting idly beside their horses crowded round the high dog-cart like flies, but the women kept apart.

Celia saw her drive up with the rest; she thought she saw a change in her, she could not tell what. The sight of her beauty, of her success, the admiration that greeted her on every side, stirred a foolish, unreasoning feeling of resentment in her heart. She had no patience sitting there watching her; she made an excuse to her lover to get down.

'I want to walk about!' she exclaimed, jumping up in a hurry; 'I can't see anything here, and I'm tired of sitting.'

'I don't think you should walk about alone,' he said. 'If you wait till I can get someone to hold the horse, I'll come with you.'

But Celia had no mind to wait. She sprang lightly to the ground and disappeared in the crowd. 'I shall not go far,' she called out; 'I shall be back presently.'

She lost herself a moment after in the crowd of horse-men and pedestrians ; she did not care where she went, so long as she got away. She did not notice that people looked after her, or, if she did, she thought they were laughing at her country-cut clothes. She felt dowdy and out of place among these fashionably-attired women in their tailor-made gowns. She got away from the observation of the crowd under a hedge, at the other side of the field, among the horses that were waiting, ready saddled for the huntsman's signal to come up from the valley beneath, where the tufters were working.

The rain-clouds, that had been drifting in from the sea unnoticed in the brilliant sunshine, broke with the suddenness and rush of a moorland shower. A cloud seemed to have descended bodily on the Ball, suddenly obscuring the landscape, and the hail came hurtling down, and everybody was skurrying away for shelter. There was a rowan tree in the hedge where Celia was standing ; it did not afford much protection, but a man rode up and drew his horse in beneath it.

He did not observe her as he rode up in his haste ; he did not seem to observe anything. In his anxiety to escape a wetting, he drew his horse in so close to the rowan tree that he imprisoned Celia behind it ; she had to flatten herself into the hedge to get away from its heels. A jaded-looking man of middle age, riding a well-trained horse that stood like a rock while his master sheltered beneath the tree, Celia would not have remarked him—he was like a dozen other worn-out men of fashion who come down to Exmoor every season in search of a new excitement—had not the Princess Bordone ridden up at that moment. She too, had come galloping over to the rowan tree for shelter, with her head bent low over her saddle. Perhaps her roses would not bear the rain.

She did not look up at once, with the hail hurtling around her, and the raindrops pattering down from the branches above ; she kept her head low.

A change had come over the jaded face of the man waiting there, and a faint, brick-dust red came up under his sallow skin, and there was a momentary gleam of amused recognition in his dull eyes.

‘Reine!’ he said almost involuntarily.

The Princess looked up quickly, and the colour dropped out of her face beneath the rouge. She did not answer him at first ; her lips parted with a scarcely-suppressed cry, and her cheeks whitened. She pulled at her rein and her horse reared, and she bent over him and patted his neck to gain time.

‘I did not expect to see you here,’ he said, looking at her beneath his lowered eyelids, with eyes half-amused, half-cold.

‘No,’ she said. ‘No—I—I have not been here long. I did not know that you were in England.’

Her voice was not quite steady, and her lips were trembling.

‘I left Paris only a week ago,’ he said, looking at her with cold, critical eyes. ‘Paris has missed you, and I—I did not expect to meet you again so soon, This is an unexpected pleasure. May I shake you by the hand?’

His eyes were resting on her beautiful drooping figure, her lovely parted lips, her proud, bent brows ; he held out his gloved hand as he spoke, but she drew back and pointed to her bandaged arm.

‘I have only one hand,’ she explained.

‘And it is engaged,’ he said.

‘For the present.’

He bowed and smiled. A smile that was still cold to her. ‘For the present,’ he repeated in a lower voice.

The Princess flushed deeply ; the rouge on her cheeks burnt a deeper red.

'I did not mean that,' she said quickly, with something like an angry flash in her eyes.

'No-o?' he said gravely. He was looking at her while she was speaking, with eyes half-content, half-critical. None of her beauty was lost upon him. He took it all in—the red glint of her gold hair, the beautiful profile, the lovely carnations of her cheeks, the curves of her full, rounded figure. He dwelt upon them with the eye of a connoisseur. His dull, tired eyes were satisfied, pleased, but still cold.

'How long are you staying here?' he asked presently.

'I don't know; not long; I may go away any day.'

'Why did you leave the theatre in such a hurry?'

'Hush!' she said, 'hush! Don't talk about the theatre here.'

'Oh, I see! you are *inconnue*.'

'Yes, for the present. I shall not be here long; but while I am here you will not betray me,' she said, tremulously.

'Betray you?' he said stiffly. 'I never betray a woman.'

'I knew I could trust you, Ludovic,' she said, with something like a half-sob, and her pleading eyes looking up into his.

He winced rather when she called him by his name, and a faint colour stole up under his yellow skin.

'It is long since I had the honour of your confidence,' he said, with a touch of *hauteur* in his slow, measured aristocratic voice.

'Ah, yes!' she said, with a strained smile, and her voice low and tremulous.

'It was not my fault that you withdrew it,' he said, still speaking low and bending over her saddle with a momentary glitter in his dull eyes.

'No,' she said, with a charming softness and appeal in her eyes, and a vibration in her voice which Celia re-



membered to have heard before. 'No, you were always generous! I was to blame. Can you—can you forgive me, Ludovic?'

He did not answer her. He was looking past her at the crowd of horsemen who were moving towards a gap in the hedge. The rain had stopped as suddenly as it had begun, and the sun was shining on the wet leaves of the rowan tree, and the scarlet berries overhead, gleaming in the sunlight, were not of a warmer hue than the *drapeau rouge* flaming on her cheek as she made this passionate appeal.

The brisk notes of the huntsman's horn were heard in the valley below, and at that moment the Master came galloping by with the pack at his heels, and everywhere men were getting in haste into their saddles, and there was a sudden hurry and skurry among the crowd; everybody was pressing towards the gap in the hedge.

'They are moving, I see,' he said coldly.

'Yes,' she said, not turning her head; 'I will not detain you. I can trust you, Ludovic, I know—you will forget—and forgive—' Her voice was low, and thrilled with a curious, eager pain.

He bowed low, and she touched her rein, and her horse sprang forward. It had sprung to the front, and was galloping down the steep, grassy slope of the hill. She had not gone through the gap into the road with the rest; she had plunged down the steep hillside through the ferns, and come up with the pack at the bottom. Celia could see her riding beside the Master, with the field following behind; she could see the red gleam of her hair quite a long way off.

'Who the deuce is that woman you were talking to, Steyne?' a man asked, who came riding up.

The man addressed was lighting a cigarette, and he did not answer directly.

'Don't you know? I thought everybody knew the

Princess Bordone,' said a man, coming up who had overheard the question. 'She is the most talked-of woman on Exmoor.'

The speaker who volunteered this information was a fresh-coloured country squire, who had been one of the crowd who had gathered round the dog-cart when she had driven up.

'The Princess Bordone!'

The man addressed as Steyne did not exactly whistle; he was too well bred to whistle, and he had long since ceased to be surprised at anything—surprise is such a waste of emotion—but a faint gleam of amusement came into his dull eyes.

'The Princess Bordone!' he repeated under his breath as he moved slowly away.

Celia was not sorry to be released. It was a shameful, ignominious position to be an unseen spectator of this meeting, to listen to these people's secrets, and not to be able to move, to cry out. It would have been no use to cry out. She was so hemmed in, so hidden away in the shelter of the hedge, behind the horses, that no one would have heeded her.

'I should like to go home at once,' she said to Nat Snow, when she got back to the dog-cart; 'there is nothing more to see, and I hate the place. I wish I had never come!'

'I was afraid you would be wet through,' he said anxiously. 'I can't think how you managed to keep dry.'

'No, I am not wet,' she answered shortly; but she did not tell him how she had managed to keep dry.

Had Celia had patience to wait on Cloutsham Ball with the other spectators, she would have seen the little, horned, Exmoor sheep hurrying together on the hillside, as the huntsman with the tufters crossed the stream in the valley below. Before they could climb the side of the Combe, a long, moving line of brown objects rose out

of the copse above them and stole hurriedly away towards Badgeworthy Wood. The stag that was harboured was among the troop, and if he should fail, there were three or four more 'warrantable' deer to take his place.

Already the faint, distant note of the horn could be heard on the opposite hill, and the Master was hurrying up to move the pack nearer to the scene of action. The great hounds on the sky line looked like tiny white dots against the green. A troop of Exmoor ponies were scampering away in wild alarm before them, but the hounds passed them by. A stag had just been separated from the herd, and the Oare Valley, so full once of dread and mystery, that had echoed with the wild oaths of the Doones, was ringing with the cheerful notes of the Master's horn and the deep, full-mouthed music of the pack.

But the stag was not to die in Badgeworthy Water; a nobler fate awaited him. As he sped swiftly away by Yealscombe Wood, over the long slopes of the moor, the hounds pressed steadily after him. The pace was too good in that smooth running for most of the field. One after the other the horsemen fell out, and the line on the hillside thinned. More than one good horse fell with its rider when it attempted the steep sides of Watcombe Hill, but still the chase swept on. However thin the line might be that followed closely at the heels of the pack, the Princess Bordone was always to the front. She rode more recklessly than ever to-day, people remarked; she did not let anything stand in her way. While the gateway into the wood that led down to the rocky bed of the Lynn was choked with a steaming throng of horses, she took the low covert wall by the gate at a leap, and splashed across the dark water, leaving the field behind her.

The recent heavy rain had swollen the stream, and the little moorland brook was a roaring torrent. The hounds

were swept down the stream as they swam and took up the running. To follow them was impossible to most of the field, but a few ardent spirits swam or waded across after the Princess Bordone, while the rest toiled down to the ford, and laboriously climbed the steep hill on the other side, only to find that the stag had gone away to sea.

There were few among the most daring riders in the hunt who cared to follow the headlong way of the stag down the seaward slope to the steep, precipitous cliffs below. There was nothing to be done for those who wished to follow, but to leave the horses tethered to a gate, and scramble down on foot to the beach. This was no easy task; the cliffs were high and steep, with here and there a slender foothold, with loose stones showering down from the shelving slides above.

There was the Hacketty Way not far off, the old smuggler's path that the huntsman remembered—for it was above Gallantry Bower the stag had made for the sea. While the huntsman with the greater part of the field behind him were making a path through the tangled brushwood of Hacketty Way, the Master and a few ardent spirits scrambled down to the beach.

A strange scene greeted them on the rocks below. Relics of the winter gales lay strewed on the rocks; wreckage of all sorts, broken timbers, empty cases and crates, looking as if they had just been broached, old empty casks in great numbers—perhaps not all empty—mute witnesses of the good ships that had gone to pieces on this iron-bound coast. A boat was just putting off from the landing-stage that had been newly built on the shore, and the Princess Bordone's steam yacht was anchoring in the bay.

It was rough walking over the slippery stones and rocks at the foot of the cliffs; the footing was so difficult, and the excitement was so great, that few people took any notice of the *débris* on the shore.

The stag had leapt from the cliff above on to a perch, an outlying spur of rock, where he could defy his pursuers to follow him. Above, and around, the loose stones were rattling down on the hounds who were so eager as to attempt to follow him to his treacherous foothold. Already two had fallen. Old Colebye, the veteran of the pack, was the first victim, losing his foothold on the yielding stone slide, and falling a hundred feet, with the stones pelting down upon him. Poor Colebye, who has led so many good runs, would hunt no more ! and Michael, who followed close at his heels, shared the same fate. While the old hounds were being carried away on stretchers, and the stag stood still panting on the rocky eminence he had gained, sharply defined against the clear blue autumn sky, with its piteous eyes turned upon its pursuers a hundred feet below, watching the huntsmen slowly climbing up to his retreat with the inevitable rope, the Princess Bordone made her way back to Gallantry Bower.

She had lost the groom when she took the Lynn Water ; his horse had refused to follow, and she had gone on alone. She was alone when she galloped up to the gate of the fir plantation that led down to the Bower.

Just before she reached the gate a horseman overtook her. It was the man she had met under the rowan tree at Cloutsham.

‘You are going back, then ; you are not going to risk your neck ?’ he said, coming up to her.

She turned upon him almost fiercely. ‘I have risked enough,’ she said, but she did not slacken her pace.

There did not seem any reason for her haste ; she was going back, and her own gate was not a hundred yards off. Her horse was already showing signs of fatigue ; its sides were covered with flecks of foam, and she was urging it up the hill.

Her companion could not understand her haste, but

something in her tone struck him, and a gleam of intelligence came into his eyes.

'It is the old story, Reine,' he said, with his cold smile; 'you have tired of the game already—'

'What do you mean?' she said, drawing up her horse suddenly, and confronting him with a fluttering light in her eyes that might be anger or alarm.

They were within sight of the gate, and a man was standing beside it looking out into the road.

He saw the panic in her eyes, her half-defiant air as she tried to straighten herself.

'I mean,' he said, 'that you are not one to stand at risk; if the game were worth it—'

'No,' she said, interrupting him passionately, 'not if the game were worth it!'

She was sorry for what she had said a moment after, but it was too late to recall her hasty words, and his keen, critical gaze was searching her face, reading her through and through.

'When do you propose to return to the theatre?' he said coolly, as if he were asking the most natural thing in the world.

'The theatre? Never!'

Her face reddened with anger, and there was a vibration of impatient scorn in her voice.

'If I can be of service to you at any time I shall be glad, for the sake of the old time,' he said. 'This address will always find me.'

He took a card from his pocket, and wrote something on it with a gold pencil attached to his chain, and gave it to her.

Her face flushed as she read it, and her lip trembled.

'You have forgiven me, then, Ludovic? You bear no malice—'

'I never bear malice to a woman,' he said coldly.

They had reached the gate by this time, and the

fellow beside it opened it sulkily. 'Is this your way?' he said.

'This is my way,' she replied meaningly, as she rode through, and the man closed the gate behind her.

Her companion took off his hat. 'You will remember,' he said, as he rode on.

'I will remember.'

The fellow who had opened the gate—a black-browed, slouching rascal in the dress of a gamekeeper—walked a few paces by her side down the path.

'I've bin waiting here when I ought to ha' bin on the shore. I shall get into a pretty row!' he said surlily.

'There was no need for you to wait, I could have cleared the gate. If you knew they had gone down to the shore, you ought to have given the alarm at once. It is too late now—'

As she spoke, the quick notes of the Master's horn was heard below; he had reached the shore, and the stag was brought to bay.

'I don't want to be told my dooty,' Tom Lake said sulkily. The gamekeeper was Susan's brother. 'If I hadn't kep' the gate, he'—jerking his thumb over his shoulder in the direction where the sound had come up from the beach below—'an' the rest would ha' bin over, an' down to the shore, wi'out waitin' for any "by your leave"—an' there would ha' bin a pretty kettle o' fish!'

## CHAPTER XIX

‘GOOD-BYE!’

NAT SNOW and his betrothed drove back over Exmoor almost in silence. Celia was too full of what she had seen and heard to talk, and her lover was sulky.

Nat chose to feel injured because Celia had gone away by herself and left him alone. He wanted to have her sitting up beside him, on the front seat of his dog-cart, for everybody to see. He wanted all his friends and acquaintances to see the Rector's daughter sitting by his side, to have her pointed out as his future bride.

He had been thinking all the day what people would say; the neighbouring farmers on Exmoor, the cattle dealers from Taunton and Barnstaple, the men he met at the ordinaries on market days; how they would nudge each other as he passed, and whisper, ‘See Nat Snow up there, wi’ the pretty girl beside him? Her’s the daughter o’ the parson o’ Stoke, an’ her’s going to marry him come Christmas. Lucky beggar!’

Instead of these envious whispers, Celia had gone away and left him sitting alone in the rain. It was a disappointment, and the Snows were not accustomed to be balked of their wishes. They generally got what they set their hearts upon.

The drive back from Cloutsham to Stoke Edith was



over the most romantic part of Exmoor, but neither Celia nor her lover took any heed of the landscape. In vain before them spread the wide rolling hills, still dim with a purple light from the heather; the green valleys, with the cloud shadows and the mist sweeping over them, and the silver line of the sea gleaming down in the west.

They had seen the same sort of thing so often before—the hills in sunshine and storm, the clouds in their varying moods—there was no longer any novelty in them.

Celia's mind was too full of other things to care anything about landscape, and she did not want to talk to her companion.

There was only one subject that Nat Snow cared to talk about with Celia by his side—the subject she most wanted to avoid.

He looked at her with hot admiration in his bold eyes, though his lips were silent, and once, when they were driving between high green hedges, he put his arms around her and kissed her.

'Darling!' he murmured thickly, holding her in his strong arms, and with his hot breath on her cheek, 'darling!'

It was evident that he had been drinking. The whisky flask he carried in his pocket, which was full when he started, was empty now.

Celia shrank from him; she could not help shrinking. She would have to bear with him by-and-by, she told herself, 'but not now, oh! not now!'

'Look here, Celia,' he said thickly, with his arm around her, 'I'm not going to be put off any longer. I've waited long enough; there's nothing to wait for.'

Celia shivered.

'The old man's willing; I've spoken to him about it. He'll put up the banns whenever I like. There's no reason why the wedding shouldn't come off at once.'

'You said you'd wait till—till Christmas,' the girl said, in an injured voice.

'Christmas be hanged! There's nothing to wait for. How do I know that you won't change your mind by Christmas? With that fellow Bluett hanging about here, and taking moonlight walks, how do I know what may happen? No, my dear, I'm not going to give you a chance to change your mind—you are mine—mine!'

He crushed the girl in his strong arms, and his fierce kiss seemed to brand her mouth with its burning.

It was no use struggling to get free. She was passive in his arms, and her cheeks were scarlet. She began to sob with a little, tearless sob, and he released her.

'I think you are cruel,' she said; 'if—if you loved me, you would not persecute me.'

'Persecute you!'

'You—you know what I mean,' she sobbed; 'you said you would wait till Christmas.'

'Oh, is that all? You needn't cry, my dear; I must wait, I suppose. It is because I love you—because I am afraid I shall lose you—that I want to get it over. I wouldn't be hard upon my own dear little girl for the world!'

He took her in his arms and kissed her again. His breath was fiery with the fumes of the whisky he had been drinking; it made her sick and faint.

'Don't cry, dear, don't cry, it shall be as you like. I would consent to anything to make you love me a little—just a little.'

He let her go, but he kept her hand in his. She did not attempt to take it away. She had gone too far to draw back.

The Parson was at the door when they reached the Rectory. He came out to the garden gate and helped Celia to alight.

'Well,' he said, 'have you made the most of your opportunity, Nat? Have you settled the day?'

The churchwarden laughed, and stretched his long legs.

'It's the lady's privilege to name the day,' he said; 'if it were mine it would be before the month is over.'

'Hang the privilege! You settle the day, Nat, an' I'll put up the banns. I'll put 'em up next Sunday if you say the word.'

'Father!'

Celia had caught the last words as she was going into the door, and she turned round, with her face grown suddenly white.

'Never mind the banns for the present, parson; wait till Celia is ready, I'm not going to hurry her,' Snow said good-humouredly, as he drove off.

'What do you mean, father, by saying you'll put up the banns next Sunday?' she asked when they were indoors. The colour had not come back to her face, and her hands were trembling.

'I mean what I say. Nat's willing to marry you at once. He's got the biggest estate in Stoke, an' not an acre of it mortgaged. He's rich enough to buy us all up to-morrow. What more do you want?'

'I'm sure I don't want his money!' Celia said, with fine scorn.

'Not want his money, you fool!' the old man said savagely; 'do you think I want you on my hands all your life? If you send Nat away with your puling folly, you'll never get another chance—'

'Hush, father! oh, hush!' Celia cried in sudden confusion and alarm. She had caught the sound of footsteps on the gravel outside, and Geoffrey Bluett was standing in the doorway. She was sure he had heard her father's last words, and her cheeks were crimson with shame as she went forward to meet him.

There was some reason for the old man's anger.

Damsel had fallen lame before he had gone half-a-dozen miles on his way to the meet, and he had to lead her back, and lose his day's hunting. It was not an unusual thing for the Rector's horses to fall lame; they were sorry screws at the best, but they covered more ground during the season than any other horses in the field. If they fell lame one week, they were out again the next; a little limp in the off leg didn't hinder them from going. He had lost the best run of the season by Damsel's misadventure. The run had been a splendid one; the stag had been killed in Gallantry Combe, in his own parish, just under his very nose.

A mist coming in from the sea, the hounds had been called off after the death, and the field dispersed to find their way home as best they could in a moorland fog. The white mist still hung low over the hills and in the combe below, the brown line of the pine trees appearing above it like a forest in the sky.

'Come in, Geoff, come in!' the old man shouted, when he saw the Squire pausing on the threshold. 'When did you come back?'

'Only yesterday; but I don't think I'll come in, thank you. I had better get back while I can; the fog doesn't look like clearing.'

'Hang the fog! Come in and have some beer—or Celia'll give you some tea if you prefer it.'

Celia did not back up her father's invitation. She stood mute and shamefaced. She was sure Geoffrey had heard the old man's words. The miserable story of her engagement could no longer be kept from him. He would know all, if he did not know already, and he would despise her. He would not understand.

'You are tired?' he said, seeing her hesitation; 'you have had a long ride; you will be glad to rest?'

'Yes, I am tired,' she said wearily; 'I am terribly tired. I have had a horrible day!'

She went upstairs and took off her things, and bathed her hot face and brushed back her tumbled hair. She did not look in the glass; what did it matter how she looked? Geoffrey knew all; she was nothing henceforward to him.

When she came downstairs he was still there, and the tea things had been brought in, and there were the silver college cups and a flagon of ale upon the table.

Her colour had come back, and was burning in a bright patch on either cheek, and her eyes were shining, Geoffrey thought, like stars.

She did not know what she said as she sat at the end of the long table pouring out tea, with Geoffrey by the side watching her. She talked wildly all through the meal in self-defence, to ward off the confession that must come by-and-by—that was inevitable.

It came all too soon.

Geoffrey thought he had never seen her beauty so brilliant; he watched her with grave interest, but he did not talk much. When the tea was over he rose to go.

‘I have to get back early; I have letters to write,’ he said, as an excuse for going away so soon. ‘Would you mind walking with me so far as the corner?’ he asked Celia, who was standing beside the open window in the semi-twilight as he passed out.

‘Yes, I shall be glad to go out and get some air,’ she said eagerly, ‘my head is bursting; it was that horrid drive. A walk will do me good—’

She followed him out into the lane—at least she walked before him until she reached Willy’s Post, while he waited for his horse to be brought round. He overtook her at the cross-road, and they walked together across the heather.

The mist had begun to clear. A wind had sprung up as the day declined, and as it swept over the moor it separated and scattered the low-lying vapours that still hung about the summits of the hills in ragged sheets of

whiteness. Again and again they united, like a phantom army, and again the wind would tear and rend them apart, scattering them in fleecy patches over the darkening moors.

The cool wind coming up from the sea fanned Celia's hot cheeks, and cooled the fever of her brain. She walked in silence by Geoffrey's side, with her eyes bent on the ground, waiting for him to speak.

She had not to wait long.

'You were at the meet to-day,' he said abruptly.

'Yes; Mr Snow drove me to Cloutsham,' she said, in a dull voice strangely unlike her own.

'You—were driving with him alone?'

'It was papa's wish I should go with him. I should not have gone if papa had not wished it.'

Her voice was low and a little tremulous; she thought Geoffrey would understand.

His brow contracted, and his cheek paled a little.

'Then there is some truth in what I have heard?' His sunburnt cheek paled as he spoke, and the lines about his mouth deepened.

She looked at him mutely; she did not answer him. Perhaps he read the answer in her eyes.

'I have been mistaken, then,' he went on, looking down at her with his grave eyes; 'I understood that you were free.'

Still she did not answer.

'When I asked you if there was any reason why I should not come, do you remember the answer you gave me?'

Celia did not answer him, she only moaned. The passionless calmness of his voice hurt her more than any reproaches. It reminded her that she had tricked him. In her selfish eagerness to win his love, she had not thought of him; she had thought only of herself. A bitter sense of shame and humiliation kept her silent.

'I believed you,' he said ; 'I thought you were a child who did not know what love was ; whose heart had never been touched. I thought, when I looked into your eyes that day, that no man had ever looked into them before—that they were cool, clear wells that had never been ruffled by a passing breath of passion. I see I was mistaken.'

He spoke in a slow, measured voice, without bitterness, without reproach. He sighed as he spoke, as a strong man might sigh who had been beaten, and who had accepted his defeat.

Celia stood humbled and dumb before him. Something choked in her throat, and she could not answer him.

'I had come here to-day,' he went on, scarcely noticing her silence, 'to ask you to give me the greatest gift a woman can give a man. I came here to ask you to be my wife.'

A sudden faintness came over her. A dreadful darkness seemed to close around her ; the choking feeling in her throat was unbearable. The only clear thing in the darkness was Geoffrey's face, with his sad, reproachful eyes, and his voice was in her ears,—

*'I came here to ask you to be my wife.'*

She never knew what happened after this. A mist seemed to rise between them, and she put out her hand.

When the mist had passed away, Geoffrey's arm was around her, and she could feel his hot breath on her cheek.

Her eyelids drooped again when she saw his face bending over her ; a strange sweet thrill set her reluctant pulses beating, and drove the colour into her cheeks. She had a mad desire never to unclothe them again.

'Have I been harsh with you, dear,' he said ; 'have I hurt you ?'

She opened her eyes reluctantly—she could not keep them shut with his dear voice in her ears—and they met his wistfully.

‘I did not know—I did not mean—’ she faltered.

‘No,’ he said, ‘how should you know? The mistake was mine, dear, not yours. God made you lovable—and I loved you. It was a man’s mistake—you could not help it.’

‘No,’ she said brokenly, ‘I could not help it. I wanted you to understand—to know—and I—I had not the courage to tell you.’

There was a shadow of pain on her face, and the tears had sprung to her eyes, and her soft, full lips were trembling. It was like the face of a child who has made acquaintance with pain for the first time—who is hurt, and does not understand.

‘Poor little thing!’ he said, looking down at the quivering lips, ‘poor little girl! Don’t take it so hard, dear! It is too late for regrets. God knows, I wish it had been otherwise. You have your duty before you; you will make a good man happy. God bless you—God bless you, my dear, in everything!’

‘My duty!’ she repeated helplessly, still clinging to him. She could not think he was going to leave her like this—that it was all over. She thought, now he knew, he would save her. He would not go away and leave her to her fate.

‘Your duty. You have your life before you—and—and you are not your own—you belong to another. You will forget me, dear, and my foolish mistake.’

‘I shall never forget you!’ she said, with a quick, sighing sob.

He stood looking down at her with pitying eyes. Every instinct of honour called to him to stifle his feelings, to leave her. It was best for her and for him that he should go away, that there should be no more explanations.



‘Poor little girl,’ he said. ‘I am going away to-morrow—it will make it easier for you if I go away. May I kiss you before I go?’

He took her in his arms and kissed her.

‘Good-bye, my dear ; good-bye !’

Celia remembered when he had gone away that Nat Snow had touched her lips last—remembered it and hated herself.

## CHAPTER XX

### AN EXMOOR FOG

WHEN Geoffrey Bluett left Celia on the moor, the mist had almost cleared. The long, dreary stretch of moorland was a chaos of wild ridges and rosy summits in the rich hues of the sunset. Low down in the valley the mist still hung about the sides of the combe, and the tops of the pine trees appeared above it in a dense brown line.

The road back to the village lay plain and distinct between the heather and bracken, a broad grassy path rutted with cart tracks and marks of horses' hoofs. She could not mistake it.

But Celia did not keep to the road when Geoffrey left her. Her mind was in a tumult. She wanted to cry out, to call him back. Nothing was clear to her, only that he had gone, that he would never come back. She turned aside out of the beaten track among the heather and the low, stunted gorse bushes; she walked blindly, hurriedly, not seeing the way she took. She was not conscious of anything but the dumb despair in her heart. The world seemed empty for her from end to end. There was no joy in the future, no hope; only dark, empty days to look forward to.

She could not bear to think of the morrow—the morrow when Geoffrey would not come—that would

bring her wedding day nearer. She shuddered, and began to cry. She was pitying herself. The thought of all those long, empty, dreadful days before her broke her down.

She was walking quickly, stumbling over the uneven ground with unseeing eyes. The instinct that drives a wounded animal to steal away and hide itself was strong within her. She was sorely wounded, and she wanted to get away. She did not heed that the dusk was falling. The lovely mists on the distant heights were no longer rose-tinted and pearly; a grey fog had settled down upon the hills, and the mist in the valley was stealthily creeping up. The brown line of the pine trees was no longer visible, and a white fringe of vapour was trailing past her over the heather,

Celia did not realise, until she found herself face to face with the outer edge of the mist, that the fog had come back, and that she had missed her way.

She was alone now on the wide moor. She could cry out if she chose—there would be no one to hear her. It was not the first time that a moorland fog had overtaken her; she had lived in this land of cloud and mist all her life. There was only one thing to be done when a sudden fog came down upon the hills—to wait for a break. A break would be sure to come if one only had patience; a sudden rift in the cloud would disclose a vista of thin, vapourish mist through which the landscape could be dimly seen. In that brief moment, before it closed in again, if she were quick enough, she would be able to take her bearings.

Celia waited for the break with dumb patience. She was in no hurry to get back. She was stunned, bewildered, the veil in which Nature had enshrouded her seemed a fitting environment for her miserable mood.

She dropped down on the heather to wait, she told herself, but really to have her little moan and weep, and give

her sad thoughts their liberty. She had tricked Geoffrey into loving her, and he despised her. This seemed the most dreadful part of her punishment—he despised her. He would never know that she loved him. She had loved him too well to tell him of her engagement. She did not know what she had expected. She thought he would understand. She felt bitterly that, if he had really loved her, he would not let another man stand in his way. He would have borne her off, as the lovers in the old romances she read bore their mistresses off. He would not have waited for consent. He would have said, ‘Come!’ and she would have risen up at his bidding, and followed him to the world’s end.

As she sat there crouching among the heather, she listened for the sound of his voice. Perhaps, even now, he would turn back and seek her; he would not leave her alone in this fog on the moor.

Celia sat watching, waiting, while the minutes lengthened into hours, and still he did not come, and the mist did not clear. Now and again, the bracken would be stirred, and a troop of deer would steal out of the mist and pass close beside her. Sometimes they turned and looked at her with startled eyes, as they passed. She saw them stalking by as in a dream. Soon it became too dark to see anything, or the mist grew black instead of grey, and she realised that the night had fallen.

When, after sitting waiting for hours for the fog to clear, Celia arose, stiff and cramped from her sitting position, she began to shiver. She was wet through with the damp, clinging mist, and chilled to the bone. It was no use sitting there all night; the fog would not be likely now to clear till morning. She began to walk rapidly in the direction of the path where Geoffrey had left her. It was just possible she had missed her way; that every step she took led her farther and farther away from her

home. As she hurried blindly over the heather, not seeing any obstruction in her way until she stumbled upon it, a dreadful doubt seized her that she might be on the verge of Pinkery Pool. All sorts of stories were afloat on Exmoor of the distressful sounds of wailing and lament that were heard of nights in the neighbourhood of the haunted pool. Strange shapes were reputed to be seen flitting over the mere, and flickering corpse-lights played above it, luring unwary travellers to destruction.

Celia recalled a story she had recently heard, that was told in the village; the incident had happened to a Stoke man she had known all her life. If she had not known the man, she would not have believed it.

There were not many sober men in Stoke—it was a wild, whisky-drinking community, wherever they got their spirit from—but the man to whom this weird experience had happened was the soberest man in the village. He never went inside the Red Deer, and he had never been known to be drunk. He seldom went out of nights after his day's work was done, but not so long ago business had called him to Barnstaple, and he was returning late across the moor.

When he was not a mile away from the village, a man passed him, and he gave him 'good-night' as he passed. The stranger did not answer him, and he went on his way. He had not gone far before he saw the dim outline of the man's figure not far from him, moving slowly in the opposite direction. He called out again, and again got no response to his greeting, and the figure disappeared in the fog, only to reappear on the other side, cutting off his approach to the village.

He did not realise at first, until this had happened several times, that the figure was walking round him, sometimes in wide circles, and sometimes so close that if he had put out his hand he could have touched it. In vain he tried to escape from it, to breathe some holy

name. His tongue clave to the roof of his mouth, and refused to utter the prayer that rose to his lips, and his lagging steps faltered as the dark shape walked round and round him silently and slowly through the night. It did not leave him until the dawn, when the daylight revealed that he was not a hundred yards from the cross-way that led down to the village.

Celia shuddered as she recalled this dismal story, and the tales she had heard of the corpse-lights flickering over Pinkery Pool. The night air was filled with a cool, damp, sodden odour, and the darkness, as she toiled wearily onward, seemed to grow every moment more palpable.

The wide expanse of moor was hedgeless and treeless—a few stunted hollies here and there, and prickly gorse bushes; and over all was a strange, dreadful, oppressive silence.

She could not go on all night walking like this, plunging through utter darkness, with no beacon to steer by. Her strength gave way at last, and her steps were slower and less certain. What was the use of going on, when every step might be leading her away from her home?

The fern and heather had given place to tangled grass while she had been stumbling forward, and this again had yielded to a velvety moss, and the descent had become steep and slippery.

Celia stopped in sudden alarm; she might even now be on the margin of the haunted pool. A faint light in the distance, a mere pin prick of light in the darkness, did not reassure her, and she stood still to take breath, and to think.

Out of the sodden, sightless void, as she stood listening, came the muffled plunge of horses' hoofs in the turf, the crackling of the heather beneath, and the tinkle of harness and the sound of distant voices.

Celia shrank back with a dreadful fear as the voices grew louder, and the muffled plunging of the horses' hoofs drew nearer. She remembered the stories she had heard of Black Willy's gang, the hoofs of phantom horses, and the smuggler band, swearing fierce oaths as they toiled up the steep moorland road. She had only just stepped back in time. The horses and men were already upon her. They had sprung up suddenly out of the mist, and a voice was calling out not a foot from where she was standing.

'Where the devil are you going? Strike a light someone! We are off the track.'

She knew the voice, though she could not at the moment remember where she had heard it.

A flare of light shot up into the darkness as the voice ceased, and she could see the outline of horses and men in the nebulous ring of light. The flame leaped up and died out; it lasted long enough for her to see a string of horses, a dozen or so, it seemed to her, and a number of dark figures urging them up the steep, slippery road.

'All right, guv'nor! We ain't very far off,' a gruff voice replied out of the darkness; and the panting horses toiled past her up the steep.

They were so close, that if she had put her hand out she could have touched them. She almost felt their hot, panting breathing in her face, and in the dim light their breath seemed to rise up through the fog. The first speaker paused a moment to light his pipe, and threw the match at Celia's feet. In that damp air it spluttered and went out, but in the faint radiance of the light she had recognised the face—the face that belonged to the voice.

It was not Black Willy. It was the Princess Bordone's steward.

She could not be sure in that brief moment, but she fancied that it was the black horse the Princess rode

he was driving up the hill. It was not carrying the Princess now; it was carrying a different load—a load that it strained under, in spite of its great strength, as it toiled and panted up the steep ascent. In the obscurity she could not see what the loads were that the horses carried; she could only see an unusual bulk as they pressed forward together. There was a pause for a few seconds as the men in front searched for the lost track.

‘What are we waiting for? We’ve lost time enough already. We sha’n’t reach Barnstaple till daylight at this rate!’ a man growled in a sulky voice, not a yard away from where Celia was standing.

‘P’raps you’ll lead the way, as you seem to know so much better than other people,’ was the gruff rejoinder. ‘Let Tom Lake alone for finding the track! If it were as dark as a bag, I’d match Tom against all the lot of you for finding the way out.’

The speaker’s confidence in Celia’s relative was not misplaced.

‘All right! for’ard on!’ came Tom’s voice, ringing lustily out of the darkness, and the horses strained forward with their burdens, and the men cracked their whips, and shouted to them to urge them on. They passed as suddenly as they came. The regular fall of the horses’ hoofs on the turf, the noise of a hoof now and again striking against a stone, was the only evidence Celia had that she had not been dreaming.

The appearance of the troop of horses and men in that dreadful solitude, though they had frightened her out of her wits, set her on the right track. She knew exactly where to find the path that led downhill to the village. She could hear, as she descended the hill, the welcome sound of the wind rustling in the trees in the valley below, and the fronds of the ferns grew taller, and a gust of wind came up from the sea.

There was a sound borne on the wind that set her



heart beating, and brought a rush of tears to her eyes—a faint, homely, far-off sound, that she had heard every day of her life as long as she could remember.

‘Coo-e-e! Coo-e-e! Coo-e-e!’

It was old Janet calling the cows in.

Eli had been too much afraid of bogles to venture over the moor alone, and the old woman had started, with a stable lantern, in quest of her young mistress.

It was the far-reaching, familiar cry that Celia knew so well. Janet was sure that her bairn would hear it; that she would not mistake it; that it would guide her wandering feet back to her home.

For the first time, as she heard that cry out of the darkness, and saw the faint, far-off gleam of the lantern Janet carried, Celia’s lips moved in a half-spoken prayer.

## CHAPTER XXI

### DREAMS

OLD Janet's 'Coo-e-e' was in Celia's ears all through that restless night, mingled now and again with the wild oaths and shouting of the men she had seen on the moor, and the panting of the tired horses as they strained up the steep hillside.

The interview with her lover seemed blotted out. She only remembered the incidents that had happened later, when she found herself astray on the moor. Over, and over again, with weary iteration through that sleepless night, she went over the encounter with the phantom troop. What could it be but a phantom that her fears had conjured up? What should the steward of the Princess Bordone, and Tom Lake, and Susan's husband, the landlord of the Red Deer, be doing on the moor at that hour of the night? And yet— She had not settled in her mind if the encounter had been with real flesh and blood, or mere phantom terrors of the night, when morning broke.

It broke wet and drizzly—a sad, misty, autumn morning. A burning heat was parching her skin, and there was a dreadful throbbing in her head that would not let her sleep. Wet and chilly as the morning was, Celia got up and opened her window wide to let in the fresh, cool air.

A few minutes later she was shivering with cold. She would have risen to close the lattice, but an unaccountable numbness had come over her; a lethargy and exhaustion that took away her strength.

When Janet came into the room to see why her young mistress had not come down to breakfast, she found her light-headed and in a state of burning fever.

The parson made light of his daughter's illness. She would be all right, he said, by-and-by. He did not let it interfere with his day's hunting; there was a meet of the foxhounds at Badgeworthy. Old Pharoah was brought round as usual when he had finished his solitary breakfast, and he rode off over the moor and left Janet to get on as best she could without him.

As the day wore on, Celia did not seem to improve. Janet's cooling lotions applied to her head did not have any apparent effect, and the shivering fits were longer and more frequent. The old woman was at her wits' end. There was no medical man nearer than Barnstaple, and as long as she had lived in the house no medical man had crossed the threshold. Nobody got ill at Stoke; if anything ailed them they dosed themselves with homely remedies, the simples and herbs that grew on the neighbouring moor.

Poor Celia's case seemed beyond the reach of old Janet's remedies. She would not take her mixtures, and her cooling lotions were worse than useless.

It was not until past noon, when Celia's wanderings had settled into delirium, that Janet made up her mind what she would do. She made it up as she sat in the girl's darkened room listening to her wild raving.

She sent for her witch grandmother. Old Nance Lake had never been inside the Rectory. Mr Carmichael had married the peasant daughter, but he had not married the peasant mother; and poor Martha had

been forbidden to let her parent set foot inside the fine house of which she was mistress. The first time the old woman crossed her son-in-law's threshold was on that September day when she came down the hill in response to Janet's urgent summons.

Janet sat watching for her at the window of the chamber where Celia lay tossing in delirium. She did not think the old woman would come. It was with a feeling of relief she saw the red spot in the distance—Nance Lake's old red cloak that was known all over the moor. She was at the kitchen door waiting for her when the old woman arrived. Celia's grandmother did not go to the front door of the Rectory; she came in the back way. She muttered some words as she crossed the threshold, and she raised a skinny, hooked finger and made a cabalistic sign.

'None o' yer tricks here, Nance,' Janet said nervously, 'remember it's your own flesh and blood.'

The old woman laughed. 'I'm not likely to forget,' she said, 'though I've never tasted bite nor sup in the place. I'd not ha' come now, but for the chiel. It's Mattha's chiel, as you say—'

She followed Janet up the stairs to Celia's room, peering curiously about her as she climbed painfully the steep stairway.

The portraits on the walls, the carved presses on the landing, the soft curtains to the windows and rugs on the floor—nothing was lost upon her.

Celia did not know her grandmother when she came in. She was going through that scene on the moor. She was calling out to Tom and asking him if he had found the track.

'Why don't you strike a light?' she said impatiently. 'We're off the track.' She paused a moment, with her brows drawn, watching and listening, and went on again. 'What are we waiting for? We've lost time

enough already. We shall not reach Barnstaple by daylight at this rate !'

'What is she saying?' Nance asked quickly, turning to Janet.

'She's wandering. Can't you see she's wandering?' Janet said shortly.

Nance went over to the bed and examined her patient. Celia turned from her grandmother irritably.

'We shall never reach Barnstaple by daylight,' she said wearily.

Old Nance sat down by her side and felt her wrist, and passed her skinny hand over the girl's fevered temples.

'It's the faver,' she said shortly.

'My! I thought 'twas faver. Is it anything catching?'

'How can I tell?' Nance said testily. 'What's this she's saying about getting to Barnstaple? Has anything a-frighted her?'

'Her was out last night on the moor, in the mist—her lost her way—an' it's my belief her saw ter bogles—Black Will and his crew,' Janet said, dropping her voice to a whisper.

'Oh! her saw the bogles, did her?' Nance said, with a chuckle.

The idea seemed to please her; she sat grinning and chuckling and nodding her old head till Janet fairly lost patience.

'It's no good your biding there making sport o' folks; you'd best get back hoame an' send her some yarbs, if you be gwin' to,' Janet said sulkily.

Still the old woman sat by the bed and chuckled.

'Seed the bogles, did her?'

'I don't see naught to laugh at; other folks ha' seen ter bogles. Eli saw 'em not a month ago. He saw Black Will as plain as I see you; he saw him at the cross-way, an' all the ghostes wi' him.'

'Seed Black Willy, did he?' the old woman said, chuckling.

'Ay, he seed 'em, sure enuff! Will an' all his ghostes, a-cracking their whips an' swearin' awful! He wasn't himsel' for days after—'

'He shouldn't be out in the roads after dark,' said the old woman, with a look of evil merriment in her black eyes, which were as keen as a raven's. 'A sight o' things I've heerd tell have been seen o' nights on the moor—hounds and horsemen a-chasing the deer as if it had been broad day. I've heard the horn mysel' as I have laid awake, an' the clatter o' the horses' hoofs.'

Janet shivered.

'You'd better get back an' send they yarbs,' she said.

'I've got no one to send. Eli must come up an' fetch 'em.'

'You won't get Eli coming up to Wytchanger,' said Janet. 'Can't 'ee send 'em over by Tom?'

'Tom? Not likely! He's got something else to do than run about wi' yarbs,' Nance said shortly.

'Tom—Tom is at Barnstaple—'

It was Celia who spoke. Both the women looked round; she was sitting up in bed, listening to their conversation. She raised her finger with a warning gesture, and pointed to the door.

'It was not bogles,' she said in a whisper, 'it was Tom Lake—and—and the man from Gallantry—'

She fell back on the pillow exhausted, and then Janet had to go over and apply restoratives.

'The man from Gallantry!' Nance chuckled to herself, as she hobbled back over the moor. 'Ho! ho! the man from Gallantry!'

Celia was no better the next day in spite of the 'yarbs' which her grandmother prepared for her. The delirium had increased during the night, and the restlessness; she could not be left one minute alone. A doctor was sent

for from Barnstaple, and a nurse was got from the village.

The Barnstaple doctor seemed to think rather gravely of the symptoms, and reflected severely upon Janet for not sending for him before. Janet bore his reproof meekly; she did not say a word about Nance Lake's visit, and she hid the 'yarbs' away out of sight. His medicines did not seem to be more efficacious than the homely remedies she had already tried. The fever would have its course; nothing would shorten its duration—nothing but death.

Parson Carmichael refused to be alarmed by his daughter's condition. He pooh-poohed Janet's fears and the doctor's gloomy prognosis. Celia had a splendid constitution; she had never had a day's illness in her life. She was no more likely to die, he declared, than he was.

Nat Snow did not share her father's confidence; he came up to the house twice a day to make inquiries, and he hung about the roads to waylay the doctor to get the latest news of the invalid. On the third day of Celia's illness he sent his mother up to help in the nursing, and she stayed in the house until the girl's ingratitude drove her away.

Celia was long past knowing anyone about her when Mrs Snow took her seat by her bedside and began arranging the physic bottles. She seemed to take her friends for enemies; she shrank, with strange aversion, from her future mother-in-law when she approached the bed, and refused to take anything from her hand, and when she moved about the room her eyes followed her with a dreadful expression of terror.

In all her wanderings she never once mentioned Geoffrey Bluett's name. Memory seemed to have shut that episode into an inner chamber and lost the key. She remembered only what had happened before and after. Again and again, during those dreadful days of delirium,

she was back under the hedge at Cloutsham, listening to the talk of the Princess and her elderly admirer.

‘Why did you leave the theatre in such a hurry?’ she would ask the watcher by her bed with strange abruptness, and she would answer her own question before her startled hearer could frame a few soothing words in reply.

‘Hush! oh, hush! You must not talk about the theatre here!’ she would exclaim in a sudden panic, and then she would melt into tears and implore the woman not to betray her—to forgive her.

‘You were always generous, Ludovic,’ she would say with passionate entreaty, her bosom heaving with sobs, and her arms extended; ‘it is I who am to blame—not you—I did not know—I thought you would understand. You will not betray me, Ludovic, you will not betray me!’

All this wild declamation was a puzzle to the jealous watcher who sat silent and uneasy beside her bed. The farmer’s wife listened eagerly to the girl’s ravings; she thought she had surprised some guilty secret. Who was this Ludovic that her son’s betrothed was always imploring not to betray her? What could this girl, who had never been beyond the confines of the moor, know about the theatre? She could not understand how these things had got into the girl’s mind, what latent memories that fever of the brain had stirred.

Mrs Snow stored up in her mind the wild words Celia dropped in her delirium, and pieced them together after a pattern of her own.

When the day came when the fever had run its course, and the dreadful images faded away, and halting memory came back, she asked Celia about her phantom lover.

‘Who is Ludovic?’ she said, fixing the girl with her black, beady eyes.

She asked the question so suddenly that Celia could not collect her thoughts, could not remember.



‘Ludovic!’ she repeated. ‘Ludovic—’

She shook her head feebly; she could not remember.

‘The man you were afraid of—that you were always begging not to betray you.’

Still Celia did not remember.

‘The man you were at the theatre with—who asked you why you came away so suddenly—’

Then she recollected.

‘Oh! hush, hush!’ she said wildly; ‘you must not mention the theatre here!’

She looked round the room with her eyes wild with terror, and damp beads breaking out on her forehead, and her lips trembling. The old terror had come back.

The woman by her bedside noted these guilty signs; they were not lost upon her.

‘Why must not the theatre be mentioned here?’ she said sharply. ‘You were there—with that man—with Ludovic—or whatever you call him—’

‘Oh! no, no, no! not with him!’ the girl said, with a shudder.

‘Who, then?’

‘Who?’

A puzzled look came into the white face on the pillow, and she put her hand to her head, as if she were trying to remember.

‘Who?’

The colour came into her face in a flood, dyeing her face and neck and bosom rosy red, and when she caught the woman’s eager eyes watching her, she put up her hands and covered her hot cheeks, and fell a-sobbing.

‘Oh! why do you ask?’ she moaned; ‘he is nothing to me—he has gone away—he thinks I deceived him. He did not know that I loved him—oh! if he only knew! if he only knew!’

She was sobbing wildly when Janet came into the

room, and she clung to her and begged her not to leave her, not to go away and leave her alone with that woman.

'Whatever have you bin a-saying to her?' old Janet said sharply. She resented Mrs Snow's interference, and she could not help remarking the girl's evident aversion to her.

'I've been asking her who this man is she's always raving about—this Ludovic. I've got a right to ask her,' the woman said sullenly.

'Oh! you've bin askin' her questions, have you?—a-worrying her poor head, an' she only just out of a faver. Never mind, my lammie; don't you be afeard o' her; she sha'n't come a-nigh you!'

She had got her bare arms, dripping from the wash-tub, round the girl, and was comforting her as she had comforted her when she was a little child, and Celia was sobbing on her damp, sympathetic bosom.

'You'd better go downstairs and attend to your work; not come up here with your arms all steaming from the wash-tub, and your wet apron on, a-bending over the bed, and like enough giving the girl her death o' cold!' Mrs Snow said indignantly.

'I forgot my arms was wet,' Janet said meekly, and she made an effort to wipe them on her apron. Celia, finding the damp arms relax their hold, clung to her old nurse wildly, and implored her not to leave her.

'Save me! save me!' she moaned. The terror that had fallen upon her at Letcombe, when she had passed the door of the haunted chamber, was upon her now. In the confusion of her mind she was back at the farmhouse, and the noises she had heard, the pattering feet on the stairs, the ghostly echoes, were in her ears—the presence of the farmer's widow had brought them back.

'Don't you be afeard, my lammie; her sha'n't come a-nigh you.'

'Do you hear what I say?' Mrs Snow called out,

across the bed, her temper roused by Janet's words. 'You put her down this minute, and get out of the room. I'm not going to stand any more of this nonsense!'

'Not if I knows it! You'd better leave the room yourself, marm; nobody axed you to come here,' Janet said stoutly.

'What do you mean, you impudent slut, speaking to me in that way? Do you remember that I was your mistress at Letcombe?' Mrs Snow gasped. She could only gasp.

'Ay, I remember; I'm not likely to forget. If I hadn't a-eaten the meat out o' the pig's bucket, I should ha' bin starved. I mind your scrapin' an' pinchin' ways! Skin a flint, you would, to save a groat, and splice a knife in skinnin' un. I know the Snows of old!'

Janet's words only seemed to stir the widow to fury. The colour dropped out of her florid face, and a flame leapt up into her black eyes, and her bosom heaved beneath the beady trimming of her gown.

'You say this to me!' she panted. Janet's storm of words had taken away her breath.

'Ay, an' I'll say it agin if you like! It's known all over Stoke, the scrapin', stingy lot ye are; there's not a penny piece you've a-got but have a-bin wrung out o' some poor soul what you've a-ground the life out of. . . . Don't you mind, dearie, don't you mind; auld Janet aint a-goin' to leave you wi' that old grummle cat!' This last sentence was addressed to Celia, who was looking with bewildered eyes from one to the other. 'Wi' all your ill-gotten gains, the Snows ain't a match for my little missy here,' she added defiantly.

A sound of scorn broke from Mrs Snow. She had got up from her chair on the other side of the bed, and was standing with her eyes blazing and her hand, which was on the pillow, working.

'Not a match for a Lake?' she said hoarsely. 'A thieving, poaching, smuggling crew—'

'No,' said old Janet; 'no match for 'em, thieves, an' poachers an' smugglers though they be! They've a-thieved from the rich—an' they'll thieve from 'em agin, gi'e 'em a chance—but they've never thieved from the poor. They've a-leaved that to the Snows.'

She snapped out each word with a kind of exultation. The pent-up fury of years broke from her in this sudden, unpremeditated torrent of abuse. The old woman had let herself go.

Mrs Snow listened to her, white and speechless. In her rage and indignation she could not find words to answer her.

'I'll not stay to be insulted in this house,' she gasped. 'Wait till your master comes home; you'll see what he'll say when he knows that I've been insulted. He'll put you to doors, bag and baggage—'

'He'll more likely put you to doors!' Janet said with fine scorn. 'Parson knows which side his bread's a-buttered too well to get rid o' auld Janet for the likes o' you!'

She turned her back on the angry woman and bent over the girl, who had worn herself out with her weeping, and was lying white and exhausted on her shoulder.

'My lammie!' she murmured, bleating over the white, wan face on her bosom, 'my poor lammie!'

'Put me to doors!' shrieked the angry woman. 'He knows better nor that, when I could sell him up any day! There's not a stick o' furniture in this house that belongs to he; it all belongs to me—to me and mine. He's got nothing to call his own, but the coat on his back; he's mortgaged every stick in the place, every penny of tithe. When he dies his gal 'll be beggar—an' you talk of putting me to doors!'

Celia shivered. She seemed past hearing anything

as she lay white and unconscious on the shoulder of her faithful old friend, but she shivered; and Janet saw, or fancied she saw, her eyelids quiver.

She laid her gently down upon the pillow, and then she turned fiercely upon the woman.

‘Out you go!’—she said, advancing in a threatening attitude towards her.

Janet spoke in a low voice, but there was something in her eyes that struck terror into the heart of the woman on the other side of the bed, and she edged nearer the door.

‘I’m going,’ she said scornfully; ‘I wouldn’t stay here another minute, not if he were to offer me the house full of gold and silver! But you’ve not heard the last of this—mark my words!—you’ve not heard the—’

The end of the sentence was cut short by Janet slamming the door in the woman’s face. Whatever she had to say, she said it outside the closed door.

When Janet returned to the bedside, where all this unseemly disturbance had been going on, Celia had fainted.

## CHAPTER XXII

### NANCE LAKE

THE invalid was worse the next day. The excitement brought on a relapse, and the delirium returned. A messenger was despatched in haste at daybreak for the doctor, and Janet had to undergo a severe questioning as to the scene that had taken place in the sickroom the day before.

'The ould missis up at the farm kicked up a row,' she said, 'and frightened the chiel out o' her wits.'

She would not give any other explanation.

'If she kicks up a row she must certainly not come into the room again,' the doctor said decidedly. 'If the girl has another such fright in her weak state, I won't answer for the consequences.'

After this, armed with the doctor's authority, Janet kept guard over the sickroom and admitted no one, not even the parson himself, when he stopped on his way downstairs to make inquiries. He did not trouble Janet much with his inquiries after the morning; he sat drinking in the room below, or rode out over the moors by day, and drank late into the night, stumbling up to bed after midnight. The curse of solitude was upon him. Soured by disappointment, in his lonely old age he was reaping the fruits of his wasted life.

He had lost interest in most things—in his parish, in his work, in his children. He had driven his son out of the house with oaths and cursing, and the daughter who had grown up to womanhood beneath his roof had never been anything to him—never touched his hard old heart. Her presence in the house only kept him from drifting into dreadful excess. Now that the restraint was no longer upon him—now that there was no one to deny him the key of that locked cupboard—he bid fair to drink himself to death.

Geoffrey Bluett had left Pinkery the day after that interview with Celia on the moor. He had not heard of her illness, and Nat Snow only came to the house now to inquire after his betrothed. He was in no mood to drink with the maudlin old man now that Celia was not there. There was no one to raise a restraining hand. There was no warning voice to whisper in the old man's dull ear, 'Stop—stop—'

While her father was drinking in the room below, Celia was tossing in delirium in the little white chamber under the thatch. The doctor's remedies did not seem to have any effect. As the days wore on the exhaustion increased. The mischief in the brain, or in the blood, seemed beyond the reach of medical skill. Things were looking serious. Janet could not leave her patient for a single minute, and, as she expressed it, everything in the house was 'upside down.'

A woman came in from the village to get the parson his meals, but her place was a sinecure. There were no meals eaten now at the Rectory if they were cooked. The broken-down old man had substituted a double portion of drink for the food he had no longer any appetite for,

On the third day of the relapse a change had come over the patient which caused the medical man serious apprehension. He suggested that further aid might be

called in, but the Rector, who was seldom sober enough to see him when he went away, would not listen to this suggestion. He had no opinion of doctors, he told Janet, when she delivered the doctor's message. If one couldn't cure a fever, a dozen couldn't. The girl would get well fast enough if they let her alone, if they gave her a chance. It was the infernal physic that was killing her!

Janet was not quite sure that he was not right. She had not much opinion of doctors. She was not sure that it would not have been better to have trusted to old Nance's 'yarbs' after all.

As the day wore on, and the exhaustion seemed to increase, Janet began to realise that the doctor's fears were not groundless, that her 'lammie,' as she called Celia, might not live through another night. She remembered all she had heard of the wonderful cures of old Nance Lake—not the 'yarbs' that had baffled disease when medical skill was unavailing, but the charms and incantations that had been potent when everything else had failed.

She sent Eli up the hill in haste for Nance as the dusk was falling, and she admitted her secretly to the sick-chamber.

Nance had evidently been expecting the summons.

'I know'd you'd send for me at the last, when yon man had done his worst,' she chuckled, as she climbed the stairs. 'I know'd you couldn't get on wi'out old Nance!'

She went over to the bed and looked at her grandchild attentively, and her hard old face softened. 'Her's like her mother,' she said. 'Her's the image of poor Mattha.'

The likeness to her dead mother had come with the change that Janet had noticed. The resemblance to the Carmichaels had faded out, and she was a Lake now.

The old woman had brought a decoction with her, the



famous specific for fevers which had won for her a reputation all over Exmoor. It was a simple remedy, but it seldom failed. When physic was powerless to allay the fever in the blood, a dose of Nance Lake's herb tea would act like magic. A gentle moisture would appear on the parched skin, and the delirium would disappear.

There was some hanky-panky in the case. The miracle was not all due to the action of the homely simples that grew behind the privet hedge. When Nance had administered her magic draught, she proceeded to weave her spells and utter her incantations over the sickbed. .

No one knew what form of words she used :—The Lord's Prayer muttered backwards, or the Creed, or the Ascription to the Trinity reversed. Some such dreadful travesty was performed. Old Nance was too cunning to let those who stood by hear the formula she uttered. Only now and then they caught a disjointed word. It was necessary to the effectual working of the charm, she explained, that her lips should not be seen to move during the incantation. This may have accounted for the unearthly sounds that issued from between them as she stood muttering and waving her hands over the bed.

If Janet had known anything of occult science, she would have understood that the old woman was merely practising the simplest form of hypnotism to quiet the patient and throw her into a hypnotic sleep while the dose she had given her took effect. There was no witchcraft about it ; but to the ignorant watcher, who stood spellbound, with a dreadful terror at her heart, it was nothing less than raising the Evil One himself.

When the passes that old Nance had made had taken effect, and the patient had sunk into a calm, untroubled sleep, Janet's fears were in no way allayed. She still thought the Evil One had a hand in it.

Nance did not go away when she had weaved her spells ; she sat down by the bed and waited the result of her treatment. 'Where's the old Dame Snow?' she asked Janet as she sat there watching ; 'I heerd she were here a-nussing.'

'She've a-tooked herself off ; missy here couldn't abide her, t'ould grummle cat !'

'Couldn't abide her, couldn't her?' the old woman said with a chuckle. 'The Lakes an' the Snows never could get on togither ; they were allus like fire an' water.'

'So I told her ; I wasn't afraid o' her. I up and spak my mind. I telled her to her face that a Snow warn't no match for my lammie, an' her flew into a passion, an' said her come of a race of thieves an' vagobonts—smugglers an' sich like.'

'Oh ! her did, did her ?'

'Ay, but I gi'e her as good as her gave. I tould her that, thieves and poachers though they be, they never thieved from the poor, they never robbed widders an' orfins—they leaved that to the Snows.'

'You tel't her that !' the old woman cried, with her eyes sparkling and her skinny old hands upraised.

'Ay ; I wern't afeard o' her. It did me good to tell her. I'd had it ranklin' in my mind for twenty years ; I'd a bin lookin' for a chance to have my say ever sin' I left Letcombe, more'n twenty year agone. I mind the time I had wi' her an' the ould missis, Mattha an' I. It were up i' the morn before light, an' workin', workin' every minnit of the day, till night come, an' little enuff to eat meanwhiles. Black bread a week old, an' a scrap o' fat pork an' greens, an' butter-milk an' taties. I mind the time when I had naught but a rabbit's head for dinner, an' I give it to the ship dog, an' I had to go wi'out. Many's the time I've bin that hungry I've sent into the village for food to eat. I had to spend so much on my belly I hadn't a penny left for my back. I was no better

nor a bundle o' rags when I left. My mither tooked me away; her wouldn't let me bide there to be starved, an' not able to save a penny wage at the end o' the year.'

Old Nance chuckled.

'Twarn't so bad as t'ould missus,' she said, wagging her head; 'her wor a close one, an' no mistake! When the childer were young—there were sax of 'em then—an' my man were working at the farm, nine shillin' a week he got—not a farden more—an' eight mouths to feed, I were glad in those days to earn a bit at charin'. I didn't mind the work being hard, if I could help a bit. I'd go up to Letcombe o' Sunday nights, an' ax about the washin the next day. "You'll be up betimes, Nance," the ould missus would say. "Ay ay, missus," I'd answer, "I'll be up by dree." "Dree!" her'd say, "what be talkin' about? If you beant up by wan o'clock, you'd better bide at hoame." It were pretty early to git up o' winter mornin's, but at wan o'clock I'd be up at the farm, an', before seven, every bit o' cloathes 'ud be washed an' hangin' out to dry. After the washin' were done, the house were scrubbed down from top to bottom wi' the suds. Soap was dear in those days; there wasn't a drop o' they suds wasted. You could a eat your dinner off any o' the boards at Letcombe, the owld missus were that petticlar—'

The old woman paused to take breath. The memory of those old washing days had brought back her lost youth. The old hardships came back and the old joys; the voices of the little children she had lost sight of sixty years ago came back with the smell of those old soapsuds, and the ache in her back that she used to feel when the day's work was done.

'You got away pretty early, at any rate,' said Janet, seeing she paused.

'Early! I got away by sax o'clock, if you call that early. I'd the ironin' to do an' the manglin' when I'd finished the scrubbin'. The missis would let me go at a pinch at

five to get back in time to get my husband's supper. My man allus expected his supper ready, an' the place cleaned up a bit when he came in from work ; he didn't take no account o' washin' days.'

'Wan till six ; that's pretty nigh seventeen hours. Her ought to ha' paid you well.'

'Her paid me saxpence, and let me take home a apern o' greens from the garden for the children's supper.'

'Saxpence a day !'

'Ay, saxpence a day, an' a apernful o' greens ; that was thought a fair wage in those days, and they expected folk to keep honest. When flesh and blood couldn't stand it no longer, an' the boys helped theirsels—an' small blame to 'em—they sent 'em across the sea. They be there now, dree of 'em, an' I be here, at eighty, a-starvin', if it weren't for the yarbs, wi' no one to gi'e me a bite or sup, an' not a penny-piece from the parish.'

'There's young Tom—'

'Ay, there's young Tom,' the old woman said bitterly, but she did not say any more. As Tom had no visible means of living, and spent the greater part of his time at the Red Deer, it did not seem likely that he had much to spare for his old grandmother.

'You'd get something from the parish if you were minded to—wan an' sixpence a week an' a loaf, maybe. Betty Beck ha' got it. Nat Snow got it for her—'

'I'd starve rather than I'd be beholden to a Snow for a penny-piece !' Nance said, flaring up with sudden passion. 'Dy'e think I've not suffered enough at the hands o' the Snows to be beholden to any of 'em for bite or sup ? There's a curse upon 'em,' she said, dropping her voice to a whisper, 'there's a reckonin' day a-coming. It is not for naught that they have oppressed the poor, an' robbed the widder and the orphan. Mark my words, there's a reckonin' day a-comin'—'

## CHAPTER XXIII

### GALLANTRY COMBE

IN spite of the old women chattering all through the night by her bedside, Celia woke up better the next morning.

She had had several hours' quiet sleep, and her skin was moist and cool when she opened her eyes and saw Janet standing beside her bed. She knew nothing of the midnight visit of her witch grandmother, and her incantations ; and when the doctor came the next morning he attributed the change in his patient's condition to his drugs. Nothing was said about Nance Lake's herb tea.

In the early days of her convalescence, Celia could not be sure that the events of that terrible night on the moor were not phantoms of a troubled brain, images conjured up by the fever which had racked her.

There was only one thing that she was sure of, that stood out clear and sharp from the shadows and illusions of those days and nights of delirium—her parting with Geoffrey.

His words seemed to have burnt themselves into her memory, the words that had sounded in her ears as the stroke of doom—'*I came here to ask you to be my wife.*'

He had gone away ; he had parted with her for ever ; he had left her to her fate. She remembered this all too clearly. The sadness of his farewell ; his kiss on her lips. She moaned and buried her face in the pillow when she remembered it. But of what had happened later she had only a confused vision.

The midnight scene on the moor, the troop of horses toiling up the steep ascent, the shadowy figures dimly seen through the mist, might, after all, be the creations of a disordered brain.

Janet confirmed her in this belief. 'Twere the bogles, dearie,' she said, when Celia spoke of her phantoms. 'It were Black Willy and his crew. You ain't the first that have seen 'em. Eli were nigh a-frighted to death when he saw 'em at the crossway. I telled him it were the sperrits he had brought away wi' 'im from the Red Deer ; but it were bogles, sure enuff !'

Janet was not to be persuaded that her young mistress had not seen Black Willy.

Celia did not say a word to her father about her phantoms. He would not have understood. He was dazed and confused now with drink from morning to night. When he was not riding Pharoah or Damsel over the moor, he was drinking in the room below. The cupboard under the stairs stood open now all day. Instead of a jar there was a keg of whisky in it now, and the key was seldom out of the tap.

The poor, fuddled old man was not conscious of what was going on about him. Sometimes he forgot Celia's existence, and fancied that his long-lost son was coming back. Something had stirred a chord in his memory. He had a picture of Frank that had been taken years ago, when he was an undergraduate at Oxford, brought out of a lumber closet where it had been hidden away, and put over the fireplace, under

the picture of his first wife—mother and son brought together again after years of separation.

‘What is this?’ Nat Snow asked, coming upon the picture on one of his rare visits to his future father-in-law.

‘It is the likeness of my son, sir. He is at Oxford now, and his tutor writes me that he is likely to take a high place in the lists—that he is sure to distinguish himself—’

‘Your son?’ said the churchwarden. He had almost forgotten the existence of the Rector’s son. ‘Oh, you mean Mr Frank; he is not coming back again, surely?’

‘He is coming back when the term is over; he is coming back to his home, of course; there is nothing to keep him away,’ his father said proudly.

‘No—o, certainly not.’ Snow had seen by this time that the old man was past knowing what he said. He was rambling in his cups. He had not come up to the Rectory to talk about Frank; he had come up on business. The parson was not exactly in a fit state to transact business, but it was not the first time that he had signed his name to papers the other had set before him when his shaking hand could hardly guide the pen.

It was for his signature the churchwarden had come up to-day. There had been some former transaction by which the timber in Gallantry Combe, which grew on the church land, had been sold for a consideration. Nat Snow had purchased it, and before he began the clearing he came up for the parson’s authority. The timber was his own, but to make things sure he had come for the Rector’s signature.

There were plenty of people in Stoke Edith ready to cry out if a clearing was made in Gallantry Combe; ready to dispute the right, if need be, but with the Rector’s signature he could defy them. Some repairs

were needed to the roof of the church, and to the porch, and the Rector had the right to cut timber for these purposes.

When the old man had signed the paper, and Nat had folded it up and put it in his pocket, he asked after Celia. Her father could not tell him anything about her; he could only talk of his son, his boy at college, who was coming back.

Nat left him to his cups, and went out the back way to see Janet. He found her in the kitchen preparing the invalid's dinner.

'What is this I hear about the horses and men Celia met on the moor the night she was lost in the fog?' he asked the old woman. His mother had repeated to him the strange, disconnected sentences she had heard dropped during the girl's delirium, and he had come over to hear the rights of it. There was that other mystery, too, about the theatre, to be cleared up; but, perhaps, it was only delirium. He did not attach much importance to it, but he had his own reasons for asking about that troop of horses Celia had seen driven across the moor at midnight.

'It's naught but bogles,' the old woman said shortly. 'She see Black Willy an' the rest of 'em.'

The churchwarden smiled and shook his head; but he was not satisfied.

'Did she recognise any of them?' he asked. 'Did she mention any names?'

'Recognise 'em? Black Willy were long before her time,' the old woman said sharply.

There was nothing to be got out of Janet, and Celia's lover turned away, not before he had charged her with a tender message to his betrothed, which slipped her memory before he had reached the garden gate. Perhaps if he had slipped a silver coin into her hand she would not have forgotten so easily.



Susan Lake—she was Susan Field now—came up to see her cousin a few days after this conversation with Janet in the rectory kitchen. It was the first time she had been to the rectory since her marriage. She came up one afternoon—a Sunday afternoon—when the inn door was shut and locked. It was not always locked on Sunday afternoon, it was left ajar sometimes, and customers stole in during service, or they came round the back way and had a quiet glass with the landlord.

The landlord was away to-day; business had taken him to Barnstaple. He had gone away the night before, after the house was shut up, and he would not be back till the following day. It was the first time he had been away on a Sunday, and Susan took advantage of his absence.

‘I should have come up before,’ she said to Celia when she had taken the vacant chair beside her bed, ‘but Luke wouldn’t let me. He won’t let me out of his sight.’

She was looking pale and worn; the ruddy, healthy colour had dropped out of her cheeks, and her eyes were red and swollen, and one of them was discoloured—at least there was a livid mark beneath it. She saw Celia’s eyes resting on the tell-tale mark, and she flushed guiltily, and began to cry.

‘Luke did it,’ she explained; ‘he’s always knocking me about. He’s a beast—and I hate him!’

She broke down with a sob, and rubbed her poor eyes fiercely.

‘Why is he always knocking you about?’ Celia asked. She was not surprised that the man had turned out a bad husband; she had never liked him.

‘Why! because I know too much. Because I could have him took up and put in prison any day. I’ve only got to speak the word, an’ that he knows!’

This reflection seemed to afford Susan comfort, and she dried her eyes and pushed back her disordered hair.

‘What has he done that you could have him taken up?’ Celia asked, with some faint show of interest. ‘Is it for doing that?’ She pointed to the discoloured mark on the girl’s cheek as she spoke, but Susan only laughed.

‘No,’ she said, ‘it’s not for that. He could beat me black and blue, an’ nothing would be done to him. He could kill me, if he liked, an’ go free. I belong to him, he often tells me, an’ he can do what he likes wi’ his own. Sometimes I wish he’d kill me outright ; it ’ud be easier. Anything would be better than to have him swearing at me all day, an’ knocking me about of nights.’

‘Why don’t you leave him?’

‘Leave him! I’d leave him fast enough if I could!’ the girl said, and she began to cry again, and to rock herself backwards and forwards. ‘It’s too late to talk of leaving him; I’ve got to bear it. It was a bad day for me when I went to the great house, the worst day’s work I’ve ever done, ’cept marrying Luke.’

Celia could not understand. She could not see any connection between the Princess Bordone’s service and Luke Field.

‘I thought you got on very well at the Bower,’ she said rather wearily. Susan’s troubles were almost more than she could bear in her weak state. ‘The Princess was a good mistress—’

‘Ay, she was well enough; but it was through her I married Luke. She and Elwood made it up. He’s told me a hundred times since that he never cared a fig for me, but they made it worth his while, that’s why she gave me that wedding dress—hang her!’

There was a red spot burning on the girl’s pale cheeks, and her eyes were blazing.

‘Why did she want you to marry him?’

‘Why? You may well ask! Because I found her out. I knowed her secret. It was to keep me silent they

married me to Luke. They thought I should blab, an' they made sure by setting that devil over me.'

Susan shivered, and drew her shawl more closely around her, and her handsome face was hard and defiant.

'You found her out—' Celia repeated.

'Ay, I found her out before I'd been in the place a week, an' her knowed it. I see things that I didn't ought to have seen. I saw the game afore they guessed I'd seen it. I could have split upon 'em then, an' got 'em all tooked to jail. I could ha' spoilt their game for 'em if I'd liked. I'd only got to speak the word, an', like a fool, I let the chance go. I let 'em find me out—'

She caught her breath with a sob.

'Oh, my God! what a fool I've a been!' she said, rocking herself to and fro on the chair.

'What had you done, Susan? What did you find out?' Celia asked, laying her hand softly on the girl's arm.

Susan shrank away from her touch.

'Don't ask me! don't ask me!' she said wildly. 'I'm bound by an oath not to tell. If I were to betray them, they'd kill me. They wouldn't stop at anything. Sometimes I think they'll kill me as it is—that Luke'll kill me.'

'Is—is it Elwood?' Celia asked. 'Has it got anything to do with the steward?'

Susan nodded.

'And Tom—and your husband—and Joe Martin?'

Again the girl nodded.

'And the horses on the moor after midnight—'

A terror-stricken look came into the girl's face, and stopped the words on Celia's lips.

'I haven't told, have I?' she said, in sudden alarm. 'Oh, Celia, say I haven't told!'

'You have not told anything, Susan, but—but I think I know—' She stooped over and brought the girl's head

down to her level, and whispered in her ear, '*I've seen them myself*—Tom, and Mr Elwood, and your husband, and Joe Martin—I saw them all. They were not ghosts, they were real flesh and blood. I heard them shouting and swearing and urging the poor, laden beasts on. What were they carrying, Susan, and why were they in such a hurry to get to Barnstaple before daylight ?'

Susan moaned and shook her head.

'Don't ask me!' she said, 'don't ask me! I know nothing. They've made me swear to be blind, an' deaf, an' dumb. If they found out I'd been tellin' you, they'd put me out o' the way. They wouldn't stop at nothing. Oh, Celia, you won't betray me! promise you won't betray me!'

'Of course I sha'n't betray you. You haven't told me any of their secrets; I have found them out for myself. I saw them with my own eyes, carrying the goods they had smuggled over the moor at midnight. I suppose they would kill me if they knew I had found them out. I'm sure they are welcome to—I've got nothing to live for.'

## CHAPTER XXIV

### CELIA'S DISCOVERY

THE discovery that Celia had made gave her something to think of during those long, weary days of convalescence. She had not been sure before, but she was quite sure now, after that conversation with Susan, that in her midnight wanderings she had surprised a band of smugglers carrying contraband goods across the moor to Barnstaple.

This discovery explained a good deal. It explained the mystery that surrounded the tenants of the Bower. It also explained the shutting up of the road through the grounds, the strict privacy that was insisted upon by the Princess, and the shutting off of all intercourse between the people employed on the place and the village. They were a rough lot, the labourers who were employed at the Bower—poachers and vagabonds that no farmer in the neighbourhood would have about his place. Perhaps, on the principle, 'set a thief to catch a thief,' the Princess had employed the worst characters in Stoke to look after her preserves. She had effectually protected herself from interruption.

But it was not of the vagabond, smuggling crew the Princess Bordone had collected about her that Celia was thinking. She was wondering what connection the man she had seen at Cloutsham, Ludovic, had with the

beautiful adventuress. There was no doubt now that the Princess Bordone was an adventuress—an impostor; her disguise had been stripped from her.

Celia remembered the conversation she had overheard while she had been sheltering in the hedge, the question he had asked, 'Why did you leave the theatre in such a hurry?' and then she recollected the letter that had dropped out of the pocket of Susan's wedding-gown.

Anyone else would have put the two together and drawn their own conclusions. The more Celia thought of it, the more she was puzzled. She only knew one thing—the woman was in trouble. Princess or not, she was in trouble. The worn-out *roué* in the hunting-field had found her out, and Susan the dairymaid had found her out. A word from either of these, and her castle of pretence—of fraud—would topple over.

Any day a mine might be sprung under her feet, and her disguises would be cast to the wind. Celia could not understand how a woman could be mixed up in such a business, how she could become the willing tool of a gang of desperate men.

She was only conscious of a strange pity for the beautiful, brilliant, reckless creature who had imposed upon everybody. She had built up so many illusions round the beautiful Princess, she was loth to let them go. She did not say a word to Janet of her discovery, of her suspicions. She locked them up in her own breast and brooded over them. It was not quite clear to her mind that Geoffrey ought not to know, but she would not have told him for the world. Perhaps he would find out for himself.

When Celia was about the house again, the first day she was downstairs, Nat Snow came over to see her. He was shocked to see how white and changed she was. But there was a change in her that her illness did not wholly account for. Her face had lost something of its

childish softness, and her eyes were serious. She did not raise her heavy eyelids when he came in ; she could not have greeted him with a smile if she would, and she was very near breaking down.

He kissed her cold cheek, and saw there was a glisten of tears on her eyelashes.

‘I am very glad to see you down again,’ he said awkwardly. ‘You have been upstairs a long time.’

‘I have been very ill,’ she said. He saw a shudder of repulsion pass over her as his lips touched her cheek, and his face darkened.

‘It is two months since I saw you last,’ he said ; ‘you have changed a good deal in two months.’

‘Yes,’ she said wearily, ‘I have changed a good deal.’

He did not speak about the wedding which her illness had delayed ; it was hardly the time to speak about it now. He talked on indifferent subjects—among them, of the troop she had met at midnight on the moor.

‘Did you recognise any of the men?’ he asked.

Celia flushed. She had not intended to mention what she had seen to anyone—to forget it if she could.

‘I knew several of the men,’ she said.

‘Stoke men?’

‘Some of them. The man at the Red Deer, who married Susan, and—and others.’

‘Luke Field? I am not surprised. I always thought he was here for no good. What other Stoke men did you see? Your cousin Tom, of course—’

Celia reddened. She did not answer.

‘You need not mind telling me, my dear ; it is between ourselves. I want to get at the bottom of this business ; there is more in it than you think, but the Stoke men are not altogether answerable for it. They do not supply the horses.’

Celia looked up quickly. She remembered all at once

that she had recognised some of the horses as well as the men.

'Did you see any strangers among the party—any people you have met before?' he continued.

Celia hung her head. She could not keep back the truth.

'I saw the man who is often with the Princess; who came for her the day she was hurt, and took her away in the carriage.'

'Elwood, the steward?'

'Yes.'

'Are you sure of this?' Nat said eagerly.

'I am quite sure.'

'Think again. In the darkness and confusion, and in the sudden fright and excitement, might you not have been mistaken?'

'I could not be mistaken. Besides, it was not dark. I saw the light of the torch on his face—and I heard him speak. I could not mistake his voice.'

'Why should you remember his voice? You had only met him once before.'

Celia could not say why she remembered the voice of the Princess Bordone's steward so well. She could not tell Nat Snow the words she had overheard in Gallantry Woods—the words that had stirred her pulses, that had so much to do with this miserable engagement of hers.

'I knew his voice,' she said simply; 'I remembered it quite well.'

'But do you know what this recognition means?' Nat said in a lower voice; 'what it means for the new tenant at the Bower?'

Celia shook her head; she did not answer. She did not ask what it meant.

'If you are right,' he said, 'if you have not made a great mistake, it is all over with the Princess Bordone. I was never taken in with her from the first, I always



thought her an adventuress ; and I never liked the look of the man. That steam yacht was part of the business. Its frequent journeys are explained now. And the stud of horses ; the hunting was only a blind, after all.'

'The Princess rode beautifully !' Celia said, standing up for her. 'I never saw anyone ride so fearlessly in my life.'

'You have never seen a circus, have you, my dear ? That woman has rode in a circus, or I'm much mistaken. She won't have the chance of riding much longer on Exmoor, that's one comfort. Her game is pretty well played out.'

Celia did not ask him what he would do, how he would use this knowledge. After he had gone away, she reproached herself for having said so much. She had an insane desire to help the woman she had hated—to warn her. If anything happened, if a discovery were made, she told herself, it would be all owing to her.

It did not seem likely that anything was going to happen. Everything went on as before. The slow, uneventful life of the lonely moorland parish went on as it had always gone on as long as she could remember—slower and duller now in the dark winter days. The winter had set in early on Exmoor ; the trees were already leafless, and the bracken was shrivelled and brown. A pall of grey mist hung over the summits of the moor, and wild storms of wind and rain came tearing up from the Atlantic—cold blasts and rain and mist by day, and the wind howling round the house by night. A new terror had been added to the long, dark winter nights by the reports of the strange sights that were seen on the moor after nightfall. All the old legends about Black Willy's troop had been revived. Perhaps it was Celia's weakness made the winter days seem darker and drearier than they had ever seemed before. She shivered when she heard the wind come shrieking across the moors ;

she hated the dull, awful monotony of the cheerless, wintry landscape, the continual dropping of the rain, the leaden sky, the bleak, bare, desolate hills. She did not wonder the common folk said they were haunted.

It was a rainy, misty winter on Exmoor. Wherever she looked there was a white wall of shadow closing round her. It was always there. The whole land seemed wrapped in mist. When the mist cleared at all on the hills, lifted for a brief while, the rain fell. The clouds came hurrying up from the channel, and spread over the distant heights of Dunkery, and the raindrops splashed all day against the window pane.

It was dreadful to think of living all her life in this wet, shadowy country, with nothing to look forward to, no outlet for love or hope. She was conscious that something had passed out of her life that made these dull wintry days different to the days that had gone before, that had changed the aspect of the hills, the song of the birds, even the glad warmth of the sunshine.

There were certain duties she had to perform in the house and in the parish to take up again after her illness. She performed them mechanically, as if moving in a dream. It was easy to play her part now the struggle was over, but the time had never seemed to hang so heavy, or the days so long. She would not have had them pass more quickly, for every day brought nearer the dreaded day fixed for her wedding.

It had been fixed to take place soon after Christmas, but Christmas had come and gone, and still she pleaded for delay. There was no excuse for delay. Nat Snow had already refurnished a sitting-room for her at the farm. He had not listened to his mother's remonstrance. He had gone over to Barnstaple one market day, and chosen the things for his bride. When the furniture waggons arrived at Stoke, and the pretty chairs and tables were

unpacked, there had been a scene. His mother had stormed and wept and remonstrated. There had never been such extravagance in her time. The old homely furniture had been good enough for her, and those who came before her. Such preparations had never been made at Letcombe for a bride before. It was enough to make the old Snows who were sleeping under those grey slabs in the churchyard turn in their graves.

The remembrance of that summary dismissal from Celia's sick-chamber still rankled in her mind, and she made some reflections on the girl her son was about to marry that chimed in ill with his mood, and hot words had followed. Nat warned his mother again, as he had warned her once before, that if she could not receive his wife civilly, if she were not prepared to yield up her place to her, she must seek another home.

The old woman had submitted with a bad grace at the time, but her anger was hot against Celia.

This domestic difficulty was not the only thing Nat had to trouble him. There had been a stir made in the village when he began to fell the timber in Gallantry Combe. People had gone so far as to question his right. The land was Church property, and what grew upon it, the low scrub and the undergrowth, belonged to the poor of the parish. They had a right to cut fuel there, and sticks for their peas and beans, and fern for bedding their cattle, and gorse for the hedges.

When Nat Snow sent his men down the Combe to fell the timber, a rumour went through the parish that he was about to enclose it—that he had grabbed the Church lands, the land that belonged to the poor, as his forefathers before him had grabbed acre after acre of the wide moorland that spread around Letcombe Farm.

Perhaps there was some reason in the outcry. If Nat had not been armed with the parson's authority to cut

down the timber for Church uses, it would have gone hard with him. There was not much respect among the villagers in Stoke for the parson, but they could not gainsay his authority. The murmurings were hushed, but the men looked on suspiciously while the clearing of the woods went on.

'It's the dower the parson gies wi' his daughter,' some of the rustics went so far as to say. 'He's a-bartered it for drink,' grumbled others who had no sense of humour.

Among the ringleaders of the party who had opposed the felling of the trees was Celia's cousin, Tom Lake, and Joe Martin, the wrestler.

Tom had long since ceased to work on the farm; he was employed altogether now at the Bower, but he was generally to be found drinking in the bar of the Red Deer. He had used some strong language about the cutting down of the trees—Tom was never very particular what he said—and it had reached the ears of the farmer.

'Your game's most a-played out, my man,' Nat said to him one day, meeting him going in the direction of Gallantry Bower. 'Black Willy won't serve you much longer!'

'Hang you! what do you mean?' Tom said, turning upon him savagely.

'Oh, you know well enough what I mean!' said the farmer, and passed on with his sheep. But Tom stood in his way.

'Jest say what you mean about Black Willy,' he said, planting himself in front of him, with his heavy brow lowering, and the veins on his great neck standing out.

'I say that the game's most a-played out,' the farmer said, eyeing him coolly, 'and that you will find to your cost some moonlight night!'

He whistled to his dog, and the big bully got out of his way.

‘Hanged if I know what you mean!’ he said sullenly. He had not got many paces away, when he turned and shook his great fist after the farmer’s retreating figure. ‘Look out for yourself!’ he muttered, with an oath. ‘If you interfere with me, it’ll be a bad night’s work for you! The Lakes have a lot o’ scores to wipe out, an’ by heaven—’

The rest of the sentence was lost—was cut short, rather. A man had gripped him violently by the arm, and stopped the words on his tongue.

‘Hush, you fool!’ said the new-comer, ‘what have your miserable scores got to do with me? What do you mean by kicking up that infernal row about a few sticks of timber? The timber be hanged! If I find you’ve been blabbing, I’ll shoot you like a dog.’

The speaker was the Princess Bordone’s steward.

## CHAPTER XXV

### A WARNING

‘I HAVE warned your cousin Tom,’ Nat Snow said to Celia a few days later. ‘If he gets himself mixed up with the Gallantry crew after this, he’ll only have himself to thank for it.’

‘Warned him?’ Celia said, turning pale. ‘Has anything happened—has there been a discovery?’

‘Nothing has happened that I know of, only the coastguard have been on the lookout for some time, and they have set the police on their track. There have been detectives about here for a week past, and the steam yacht is expected back to-night. There’ll be a pretty haul, I expect, when they do catch ’em.’

‘And the Princess—what will become of the Princess?’

Nat Snow laughed. ‘They’ll make short work with the Princess; the next time you hear of her will be in the county gaol.’

‘You don’t mean they will put her in prison?’

‘Without doubt they will put her in prison; she will take her chance with the rest. A couple of years’ hard labour wouldn’t hurt my lady.’

Celia shivered.

‘You are sure they will not let her go free? She has

got nothing to do with it. What can a woman have to do with smuggling?’

‘More than you think, my dear. The law will soon find out what she’s got to do with it. I think someone should let Bluett know the kind of tenant he has got at the Bower, but it won’t do to spoil sport; it’ll be time enough after the capture,—but he ought to be on the spot.’

‘Should papa write to him?’ Celia said, her pale face flushing guiltily.

He saw the colour rise in the girl’s face, and he cursed himself for having mentioned his rival’s name.

‘Not likely,’ he said roughly; ‘the old man’s not to be trusted. You’d better keep a still tongue, my dear; Bluett will find out fast enough.’

Nat Snow was right about the parson. He was not to be trusted. Hind-hunting had begun on Exmoor, and the old man was seldom absent from a meet. The large company that gathered at Cloutsham for the stag-hunting had dwindled to half-a-score or less when the hind-hunting season set in. Among this small company the Rector of Stoke was always to be seen. His lean figure, his ruddy face and white locks streaming in the wind made him a conspicuous figure at every meet. He had got a reputation—a well-earned reputation—of being the hardest rider on Exmoor, of having seldom missed a meet for fifty years. This had given him some sort of popularity in the county. People did not stop to inquire what this devotion to sport had cost him, what neglect of other things, what subversion of all else in life to this single pursuit. It was the fashion to admire the drunken old Nimrod, to encourage him in his folly; his exploits were recounted in the local papers, and the questionable ruses by which he had eluded, on various occasions, the vigilance of his bishop.

His admirers did not see within the walls of the lonely

parsonage amid the wilds of Exmoor. They did not see the pitiful spectacle of the old man maudling over his cups; of his neglected parish. After a week's hard riding, and hard drinking, he was not exactly in a frame of mind when the Sunday came for the Sunday duty. He got through it somehow by mere force of habit, and when the service was scrambled through, he went back to his cups. In any other parish in England he would have been reported to the bishop, but in Stoke men did as they liked. The law did not trouble them.

On the day when Nat Snow had that conversation with Celia, her father had already gone off on Pharoah to a meet on the other side of the moor. He would not be back until dusk, very likely not until long after dark. The grey mist that had lain so long on the hills had lifted, and the sun shone out for a few hours—a pale, misty sun that made the purple heights and waste stretches of moorland seem only more desolate; and blasts of keen north wind came driving in from the sea.

Celia shivered and drew her cloak around her as the garden gate fell to behind her, as she started for an afternoon walk in the rare sunshine.

'I am going out,' she said to Janet; 'I have not been out so long, the air will do me good.'

'You'll not be late,' Janet called after her; 'you'll be back by sundown?'

Celia laughed and nodded, and ran down the steep moorland road. She did not tell Janet where she was going.

When she reached the head of the Combe, she stopped with something like a cry of dismay at the work of destruction going on below. A considerable clearance had already been made, and the trees were being carted away. The place looked bare and desolate. The waving oak woods that were the glory of Gallantry Combe had disappeared, and the hillside was bleak and barren.



Celia did not know why the sight of the destruction that her lover had wrought in the valley beneath should have hurt her so much ; she could not account for the stricken feeling at her heart. It seemed as if the romance of her childhood had been destroyed by a ruthless hand ; as if her girlish day-dreams had been rudely shattered. She did not know how much she had loved this woodland, the sweet, dusky, mysterious depths where she had played as a child, where her girlish fancies had taken form ; where she had loved to wander in the springtime with the flowers and grass at her feet, and the shade of the great trees overhead. Now there would be no longer any shade. The noonday sun would scorch up the grass and the flowers, and the birds and the wild woodland creatures would seek another home.

She shivered, and went on her way with the tears smarting in her eyes. It seemed like a picture of her own blighted life. The world was empty for her from end to end ; it was as bare and desolate as the clearing in the valley below.

She turned away from the hateful scene with a shudder, and hurried down the rough moorland road. Her way led through the plantation where she had first seen the Princess and her steward. She remembered the envy, the admiration which had stirred in her on that day, the childish wonder and awe with which she had beheld the vision of the beautiful fairy Princess riding through the wood in her Lincoln green.

Now all this was changed. The Princess was a princess no longer. The tinsel and trappings had been stripped from her, and the sawdust had been revealed. She was a wretched, miserable woman, who had lent herself as a tool to a gang of adventurers, and she was in hourly peril of a felon's prison.

It was to save her this ignominy Celia had undertaken the journey to the Bower on this bleak winter day. She

could not bear to think of her shamed and dishonoured ; of the beauty that men had raved about, that everyone had worshipped, being made a spectacle to the gaping rustics on the moor.

Celia only meant to warn her ; to give her a chance to escape before the end came. It might come any time now. With the detectives in hiding at Letcombe, it might come that very night. She had not dared to trust a messenger, she had come herself.

The gate that led into the plantation was unlocked, and she pushed it open and passed through. There was no gatekeeper at the lodge, which had been newly built, and she did not meet any men in the grounds. The place looked deserted, she remarked, as she approached the house. There was not anyone in sight, and the bell, when she rang at the front door, gave back a hollow sound.

She had to ring twice before her summons was answered. It was not answered from the inside ; a man came round from the courtyard beyond, and asked her business. He did not speak very civilly—a churlish, ill-conditioned fellow, one of the grooms, and he carried a stable fork in his hand, as if he had been disturbed in his work.

The Princess was not in the house, he said ; most likely she was about the grounds. It was no use anyone ringing at the door ; she did not see strangers. Mr Elwood, the steward, saw everybody who came to the house on business.

He offered to call the steward, but Celia said her errand was not with him, it was with the Princess. She hurried away in alarm lest the man, who looked at her suspiciously, should call his master. She didn't know what she should say if Elwood came ; what reason she could give for her visit.

She hurried away by the road she came, but at

the meeting of the paths, where she had lingered hidden among the shrubs with Susan, and watched the Princess ride past on that long-ago sunshiny day, she paused to take breath, and looked down at the shore below.

The sea lay deeply blue below, reflecting the steely blue of the clear, cold sky above. The grass and bracken grew down to the water's edge, and the cliffs sloped steeply up till they met the sky. The dark blue waters and the encircling hills seemed to breathe a strange peace and solemnity — the eternal rest and peace of Nature, unmoved by the passing follies of man. Celia remembered the hills and the bay since she was a little child; the old calm and peace she remembered were still here. When the Princess and her lawless band had been swept away, the hills and the waters would be just the same, green, and sweet, and still; they would take no account of their passing. She was thinking this in a blind, stupid way, when she was startled by a footstep on the gravel behind her, and turning round in a sudden, senseless fright, she saw the Princess coming towards her. She was coming from the direction of the stables, and she had a whip in her hand, and was wearing the riding dress Celia had seen her wear on the moor. Her face was flushed with the fresh breeze coming in from the sea, and her beautiful brown eyes were full of that strange liquid light that men raved about; and her dusky gold hair was shining in the wintry sunlight.

Celia caught her breath when she thought of this lovely creature in a felon's prison. It seemed like desecration. Whoever suffered, she must be saved.

'You here!' said the Princess, with some surprise. 'I thought you were in bed—ill—somebody told me you had been ill.'

She did not offer Celia her hand, and she stood

some paces off, talking in her high-pitched, haughty voice, with the condescension of a *grande dame*.

Celia did not know how she should tell her, how she should begin. She was almost sorry she had come.

'I have been ill,' she said rather tremulously; 'this is the first time I have been out so far. I—I should not have come now—but—but I wanted to warn you.'

'To warn me?' The Princess spoke so loud that anyone near could have heard her, and there was a ring of scorn in her voice which made it harder for Celia to go on.

'Hush! oh, hush! she said, raising her hands with a warning gesture; 'my message is only to you—not to the rest.'

A message? I did not know you had a message,' she said more gently. 'I thought the dairymaid I sent away had been telling you a lot of nonsense she had made up. She is a relation of yours, I believe.' She spoke scornfully, as if Celia were dust under her feet.

'Susan is my cousin,' Celia said, with some spirit. She was not ashamed of the connection. 'But it is not Susan. She has not told me anything—I have seen it for myself.'

'Seen what?' the Princess said defiantly.

'The horses and men crossing the moor at midnight.'

'What have horses and men crossing the moor at midnight to do with me?'

'Much, oh, much! They came from the Bower. It was on the hill, on the Gallantry Road I met them. Other people have seen them besides me—and—and it is all found out—it is a secret no longer.'

'I do not know what you mean by being all found out,' the woman said defiantly; but her face paled as she spoke, and her voice was not quite steady.

‘I mean that there are men in the village on the look-out—they have been here a week, they know everything—and—and if they find you here when they come, they will take you to prison.’ Celia did not know how she got it out; how she had the courage, with the Princess standing before her in her beauty and her pride, to say such a dreadful thing.

‘Take *me* to prison!’ the woman said, with a scornful laugh. ‘What have I got to do with the people here?’

Celia was silent.

‘You have made a mistake, child; it is the men about the place you should warn—it has nothing to do with me!’

She swept past Celia, holding her head high and her handsome shoulders squared, and her step firm. She did not seem alarmed or distressed, and for a moment Celia thought she had made a mistake.

Only for a moment.

‘If I have made a mistake,’ she said, hanging her head, ‘I am very sorry. I meant it for the best. I could not bear to think of your being taken to prison—of the disgrace—the shame—’

‘The shame is not mine!’ the Princess said with scornful impatience; but she did not stop, she walked on in the direction of the house, and Celia made a step or two after her.

‘I beg you will stop a moment,’ she said, laying her hand on her arm. ‘I have a letter of yours from the theatre—it fell out of the pocket of the dress you gave Susan.’

‘A letter of mine from the theatre!’ the woman repeated. The colour had dropped suddenly out of her face, and she stopped in the middle of the path—she did not need Celia’s hand to detain her.

‘It was addressed to you at the theatre; it was about you going away in a hurry—making an excuse to go

away—and playing a new part. Oh, I'm afraid I've not got it—I've left it behind after all !'

Celia had been fumbling in her pocket for the letter, but it was not there. She turned her pocket quite out to find it.

'You have left it behind ! Who was the letter from ?'

'It was from a man—not Ludovic—'

'What do you know about Ludovic ?' the woman demanded fiercely, her face flushing suddenly scarlet.

'I—I heard you speaking to him at Cloutsham—under the tree the day when the shower came on, when you asked him not to betray you. It is not he who has betrayed you—'

'Of course it is not he ! He is a gentleman—he would not betray a woman—he would not let a woman run a risk—he would not hide himself behind a woman !'

She spoke bitterly ; the colour came and went in her face, and her eyes were scornful and full of angry, impatient light.

'And the letter,' Celia said ; 'what shall I do with, the letter ?'

'What you like, child. Put it in the fire if you like, or hand it over to the police. It doesn't matter to me what you do with it. I do not know why you took the trouble to come and warn me.'

'I could not see you suffer,' Celia said, with the tears swimming in her eyes. 'I—I had admired you—envied you—so much I could not bear it.'

'No, child, no, you could not envy me. You had a romantic idea of what a Princess should be—and when your illusion was dispelled, you could not bear to see the triumph of the gaping crowd. Keep your beliefs, child ; never lose your faith in the noble and good ; never learn the baseness of glorying in another's downfall.'

She left her, and passed down the road, with her beautiful head bowed, and her handsome shoulders drooping, and Celia turned away with a sob. She could not bear to see her idol shattered.

## CHAPTER XXVI

### A BIT OF A FALL

CELIA'S warning was not a minute too soon. As she made her way back up the steep road that led from Gallantry Bower to the heights above, she stopped more than once on the way to rest.

The path seemed steeper to-day, and the road more rough, and the wind blew up from the sea in chilly gusts. She caught glimpses of the sea, and the misty headlands of the coast, more than once on her upland way. It was while she was pausing to take breath at an opening of the wood, where she could look down on the shore beneath, she saw a thin curl of smoke on the blue sky, and the white line of the steam yacht stealing round a distant point. It was close to the shore to-day, creeping stealthily round the headlands; it was not steaming boldly across the sea, with the flag flying.

It was not Celia alone who observed it; some woodmen who had been working in the Combe below, felling the trees, were watching it as it crept stealthily round beneath the cliffs. The cliffs were high here, and sloped steeply down to the shore, and the men had climbed to one of the few spots where a view of the sea could be obtained. They were strangers to Celia, not men of the village. Nat Snow had got them from a distance to work in the clearing. There were some half-dozen of them, and they kept aloof from the rest.



They looked after Celia suspiciously as she came up the road from the Bower, and whispered among themselves. She did not notice their suspicious looks ; she was too full of her own reflections.

When she got back to the house, she found her father had arrived before her. He had met with an accident, and turned back. Old Pharoah had got his leg into a rabbit hole, and he had gone down, and pitched his master over his head. It would not have mattered if the Rector had fallen on the heather—he had had a hundred falls in his day—but the bit of moor where he fell to-day was covered with sharp bits of rock jutting out among the bracken. He had pitched on one of these sharp stones, and cut his head ; not much of a cut, but it bled a good deal, and Janet had to bandage it up.

It was bandaged, and the old man was sitting in his accustomed place, drinking as usual, when Celia went in.

He was dull and heavy ; Celia thought he had been drinking. He did not look up when she went in ; he sat with his head drooping forward on his breast, and his nerveless hand still around the glass which he had just emptied.

‘ Was it a bad fall, father ? Are you hurt much ? ’ she asked, coming over to his chair, and taking the glass away.

His hand fell to his side when she removed the glass, and he looked up at her stupidly.

‘ Only a bit of a cut,’ he said drowsily.

‘ Won’t you see a doctor ? Hadn’t Eli better ride over for Mr Bryan ? ’

‘ A doctor can do no good,’ the old man said irritably. ‘ Janet has bandaged it as well as a doctor. It was not much of a wound, nothing to speak of.’

He would not hear of a doctor being sent for. He sat in his chair by the fire, with his head on his breast, sleeping, or seeming to sleep, till the short dark winter day drew to a close. He refused the tea that Celia

brought him ; he did not like to be disturbed. When the lights were brought in, he motioned for them to be taken away. He could not bear the glare.

‘I can’t think what you want with all that light,’ he said irritably, when Janet put the two tall silver candlesticks on the table.

Celia snuffed out one of the candles, and moved the other aside, but he turned upon her fiercely.

‘Take it away, I say ; take it away !’

She put out the remaining light, and sat down by the hearth, where some red embers were burning in the grate ; she did not dare to stir them into a flame.

‘When is the wedding to be ?’ he asked her suddenly, as she sat opposite to him, in the dull red glow of the firelight.

‘I—I don’t know exactly, father ; some time this spring,’ she stammered.

‘Some time this spring !’ he repeated angrily. ‘It was to have been before Christmas, and now you say, “Some time this spring.” What are you putting it off for ? Why are you making these delays ?’

Celia did not answer ; she only hung her head.

‘There is nothing to wait for. I shall speak to Nat ; if he’s willing, I’ll put up the banns next Sunday.’

‘Not next Sunday, father ; oh ! not next Sunday !’ Celia said, in a voice of alarm.

‘Why not next Sunday, I should like to know ? You’ve given your word, an’ Nat’s got his house ready. I’m not going to have any more shilly-shallying. You’ve promised to marry him, and marry him you will ! I’ll have no drawing back.’

‘I don’t want to draw back, father,’ Celia said humbly.

‘I should think not ! You don’t know what drawing back would mean.’

Celia did not ask what it would mean ; she shivered, and let her face fall into her hands. There was no way

of escape ; she knew that well. She only pleaded for a little delay.

‘Look here,’ he said hoarsely, ‘there must be an understanding. Nat’s coming up by-and-by ; when he comes, you must fix the date. No more excuses, mind. I—I don’t know what may happen. I’m not myself. I shouldn’t have let Pharoah stumble into a ditch if I’d been myself. The sooner the wedding’s got over the better.’

‘It shall be when you like, father,’ Celia said, with a little sob in her throat, and her hands pressed over her eyes. It must come sooner or later, she told herself ; it would only anger the old man if she pleaded for further delay.

While they were speaking, a knock at the outer door made her start and flush. She thought Nat had come ; that she would have to decide.

It was not Nat Snow’s voice ; it was a woman’s voice she heard in the passage—a sound of sobbing, and a woman’s voice raised in grief and passion, and the feeble wail of a young child. It was Susan Field. Celia could not think what could have brought Susan out on a winter’s night, with a fortnight-old baby in her arms.

She got up quickly, and went out into the passage, and closed the door of the sitting-room behind her. The front door of the house was open, and Susan was standing in the doorway. Her head was bare, and she had a thin woollen shawl round her shoulders, and a little bundle beneath it, which she hugged to her bosom. Her beautiful brown hair was dishevelled, and her face was red and swollen with crying, and there was the tell-tale discoloured mark under one of her eyes and on her cheek that Celia had seen there before. She was sobbing bitterly, and swaying backwards and forwards in her anguish, and her bosom was shaken with her sobs.

'You here, Susan! Whatever has brought you here?' Celia exclaimed, when she saw the girl weeping in the doorway.

'I've nowhere else to go; he've a-turned me out o' doors,' she sobbed.

'Who has turned you out of doors—your husband? You don't mean that he turned you out this bitter night—and with a baby, too!'

'The brute!—the brute! He put me to doors; he swore if ever I showed my face there agen wi' the babe, he'd be the death of me, an' he'd brain the chiel!'

'He had no right to turn you out of doors; you are his wife—and his poor little child—'

'Hush!' said Janet, harshly, taking her young mistress by the arm and pushing her out of the draught from the open door into the kitchen beyond. 'Hush! least said about that the better! You'd best come in an' shut the door, not stand raving there like a mad woman,' she said to Susan. 'You're welcome to sit down by the fire an' warm yourself, but you can't bide here. You'll have to troop back where you come from, whether he lets you in or not.'

'I'll never go back!' Susan said, under her breath; 'I'd die first!'

'A pretty tale! but you can't die here. We've got sick folk enough here already. The passon just a-knocked hisself silly, an' missy here, not fit to be out of her bed, an' you a-talkin' o' dying!'

The old woman threw up her hands with a fine gesture of scorn; but she put the miserable sobbing creature in her own seat by the hearth, and she stirred up the wood fire into a cheerful blaze.

'Let me take the child,' Celia said, holding out her arms; but Janet pushed her roughly back into the settle.

'No, no; best not meddle wi' it. If it onst begins

crying, there'll be no stopping it, an' we shall have the maister out, an' he'll put us all to doors, takin' in married wimmen an' babbies as ought to be in their own homes !'

'It's no home of mine,' Susan sobbed. 'If I starve, I'll never set foot inside the place again ! It's never been no home to me. Only blows, an' hard words, an' curses, from morning till night. I'd rather beg my bread than go back to him.'

'We'll see about that !' Janet said grimly ; 'you can't bide here. We've got enough trouble of our own wi'out taking other folk's troubles upon us. If you don't clear out pretty quick, I shall send for t'owld woman at Wytchanger.'

'I don't care who you send for, I'm not going back !' Susan said sullenly. Her convulsive sobs did not cease. She sat helpless and weeping ; whatever Janet said did not move her. She had gone through so much ; the remembrance of her anguish dulled every other sense. She could only moan and weep, and pluck at her throat as if she were choking.

Janet went out of the kitchen, and left the cousins together. For a minute after she was gone there was silence in the kitchen, except for the choking, hysterical sobs that Susan could not master. When she looked up and saw they were alone, she reached out her hand and touched Celia on the arm.

'It was all along o' the people at the Bower,' she said, in a frightened whisper ; 'they've a-heard something, an' they thought I'd ha' telled.'

'What have they heard ?' Celia asked.

'I dunno. They're found out. Someone's split upon 'em, an' they think it's me. Luke came back an hour ago in an awful tear. He'd been down to the Bower, an' they sent him back ; they said the game was up. He began cursin' an' swearin' awful when he came in, an'

knockin' me about. I thought he was going to kill me. He's most a-beat me black and blue. I'd never go back to him after that, not if I were to starve.'

She burst out sobbing afresh at the recollection of her husband's ill-treatment, and the babe in her arms began to cry.

'It was not you who should have suffered, Susan, it was I,' Celia said, in a hard, strained voice. 'I shall go and tell your husband it is all a mistake; you have been blamed unjustly. It was I who gave the information—I had a right to give it. I saw him, I saw them all that night on the moor. I saw them as clearly as I see you now.'

'You!' Susan gasped. 'You!'

'Yes; why not me? I am not mixed up with their smuggling, poaching gang.'

'Don't be too sure! oh, don't be too sure!' Susan said, putting out her hand with a gesture of dismay. 'If anything happened you'd never forgive yourself.'

Celia could not think what the girl meant. Her connection with Tom Lake was not so near that if anything happened to him—if he were sent across the seas to join her other interesting relatives—it would cause her life-long remorse.

'Not forgive myself?' she said. 'What have I to forgive?'

The girl did not answer her for a minute; she stooped down over her baby, and her face was hid.

'I dunno,' she said sullenly; 'I ought not to have said it; I didn't know what I was saying. You've done your part; you've spoken to the Princess. Whatever happens, you'll have the comfort of knowing that you warned 'em.'

'Comfort!' Celia said indignantly. 'What comfort can it be to me to set a lot of smugglers and vagabonds on their guard? I warned the Princess. I could not bear to see her suffer. My message was to her, not to

the rest. The men are nothing to me ; they are not Stoke people even, only Tom, and he must look out for himself. It would be much better for the village if they were all caught and transported.'

But Susan only hung her head. 'Oh ! you don't know,' she moaned ; 'you don't know !

## CHAPTER XXVII

‘MY SON!—MY SON!’

THE night was wild and wintry, with driving rain and fierce gusts of wind sweeping across the moor. There was no moon, and the rain beat against the window panes, and the wind howled round the corners of the house. The howl rose to a scream at times, and a loose branch of a creeper, nailed against the wall, beat upon the window of Celia’s room like the rapping of an uneasy spirit seeking to come in.

She did not get much sleep ; what with the wind and her uneasy thoughts. The events of the day kept her awake long after she had laid her head on the pillow. She did not go to bed until some hours later than her usual time. She had waited up on Susan’s account. She would not hear of her being turned out into the rain when the house was shut up for the night, as Janet had threatened. It was not a night one would turn a dog out in, much less a woman and child.

Janet had reluctantly consented at last that Susan should share her bed ; or rather she had given up her bed to Susan, and made herself a couch on the settle. Before she had retired for the night, she had a visit from Nance Lake. She had despatched Eli in haste for the girl’s grandmother when she had left the kitchen early in the evening, and he had brought the old woman back with



him. Nance had gone to the Red Deer against the girl's wish to give Luke Field a bit of her mind. The little household at the Rectory had waited up to see the issue of the old woman's errand. The Rector had gone off to bed, and left them sitting round the kitchen fire. He had not made any remark when he saw Susan nursing her babe by the hearth; he seemed dazed and confused as he paused on his way to bed and looked in at the kitchen door. He looked beyond the women sitting at the hearth, with a wistful look in his light blue eyes, as if he were looking for someone, and closed the door with a sigh.

Celia listened to him slowly climbing the stairs, stumbling as he went, as if the way were unfamiliar. She noticed that his step was slow and dragging, but it did not strike her that there was anything amiss. She thought he had been drinking. It was lucky he had not noticed Susan sitting there; there had been no need for explanations.

When he was gone upstairs, and his bedroom door had closed upon him, Susan's grandmother came back.

Her errand had not been successful. The landlord of the Red Deer had refused to take his wife back. There had been high words, and he had turned the old woman out of his house as he had turned his wife out.

Old Nance chuckled as she related that closing scene of her interview with Luke. 'He wor a-goin' to lay his han' on me to put me out,' she said, with her dark eyes blazing, 'but I jest looked at 'un, an' he roared out wi' pain. His han' were stiff an' straight; he couldna' move a finger of it. "You old hell cat," he called arter me as I cam droo the village, wi' the folks at their doors lookin' on an' listening, "you've a-wutched me, you have!" Ay, ay, he's a-wutched, sure enuf! If he dies in his bed like other folk, my name's not Nance Lake!'

Old Nance would not let Eli go back with her. She

was not afraid of the storm or the darkness ; she was used to storms and darkness. She went out into the rain and wind, and the kitchen door closed behind her. She went as she came, without any greeting to those assembled round the hearth.

More than once, when Celia lay awake in the night, she fancied she heard the old woman's voice outside chuckling to herself, "Ay, ay, he's a-wutched, sure enuf!" The house seemed full of noises ; the woodwork creaked, the deathwatch ticked behind a chest of drawers close to her bed ; mice scurried up and down inside the wainscot, and some restless spirit outside tapped insistingly at her window-pane for admission. The night seemed interminable. She thought the dawn was never coming.

It came at last, grey and chill—a shivering, dreary dawn, with a pitiless rain falling, and the wind southing in the trees.

She was aroused by a stir, an unusual movement on the floor below, and she caught the sound of strange voices in the kitchen, and presently she heard footsteps outside her door. She sat up in bed and listened, but the steps did not stop at her door ; they passed on to the door of Janet's room beyond. 'It was Susan's husband come to fetch her.'

Celia jumped up and fastened her door in a sudden, senseless panic. She could hear her heart beating as she stood with the handle of the door in her hand. Her fears were groundless. It was not Susan's husband—it was a messenger who had been despatched in haste to bring the wretched woman back to her home. Celia heard her sobbing outside, and making an ado in the passage as Janet hurried her along.

'Oh, my God!' she was moaning to herself. 'Oh, my God!'

It was not until the hurried steps had ceased in the

house, and she heard the voices outside—Susan weeping, and the men urging her to come on—that Celia ventured to open her door.

Janet was coming up the stairs, and she caught sight of the girl's white face in the doorway.

'Go in, my lammie, go in!' she cried, leading the trembling girl back to her bed.

'What is it? what has happened?' Celia gasped. She was sure by the woman's face something had happened.

'You may well ask!' Janet said, throwing up her hands. 'This has been a bad night for Stoke. One man a-killed, an' two a-wounded nigh to death, an' the Bower in flames—'

She paused for want of breath, and Celia caught her by the arm. 'Who is it killed?' she said faintly. She was thinking of Susan's words.

'No one that you need mind about, my lammie,' the old woman said in a soothing voice. She did not know what effect her news might have upon the girl. 'A bad good-for-nothing, that deserved no better.'

'Do you mean—Tom Lake?'

'No, no; you let Tom Lake alone to take care of hisself. He's got off wi' the rest; but Susan's precious husband is a-brought home dead, shot through the heart. The men what brought him home came to fetch her. Her's a-making as much fuss about him as if there had never bin a word between 'em!'

Celia shivered. 'He was found out, then,' she said; 'the police tried to take him?'

'Ay, they were all found out, the whole smuggling crew! A cargo came in last night, it appears, an' they were carryin' it to Barnstaple, an' the 'sizemen got scent o' it, an' lay in wait on the road an' trapped 'em. They've got half-a-dozen of 'em, but the ringleaders have escaped; that fellow Elwood, who came here pretendin' he were a steward—'

'And the Princess?'

'Princess, indeed! As much a Princess as I am!' the old woman said, with fine scorn. 'Madam have a-tooked herself off—more's the pity!—but before she went she set fire to the Bower. You can see the smoke of it from here.'

A dark cloud hung low over the hills, and there was a lurid light in the western sky like a dusky, crimson dawn. Celia shuddered and turned away; she could not bear to see it. In her excited state it seemed to her that she had brought about this misfortune; that the death of the miserable man at the inn lay at her door. She could not be persuaded to lie down again; she dressed in trembling haste and came downstairs. The shock had so weakened her that she had to cling to the banisters for support; her limbs ached, and there was a dull throbbing in her brain.

'It's all along o' Nance Lake,' Janet said, when she brought in the breakfast; 'she wutched him—it's all come o' her wutching!'

Celia had not much faith in witchcraft; she could not believe her grandmother had this mysterious power.

'It's a coincidence,' she said; 'the wretched man would have died else. Granny had nothing to do with it.'

'I don't know nought about any of their new-fangled names; it used to be called "wutching" in my time. Her put a spell upon him last night, an' he's brought home dead this morning. Nothing could be plainer.'

The Rector had not come down to breakfast this morning, and Janet carried him a cup of tea upstairs. 'I had hard work to rouse him,' she told Celia when she came down, 'he wor sleeping that heavy; an' when he awoke, he was dazed like; he did not seem to have no more sense nor a babby.'

Nat Snow came over to the Rectory during the morning to speak to the parson. An inquest had to be held on the man that had been killed in the midnight struggle, and he came for instructions. As his business was urgent, Janet took him up into her master's bedroom.

'Passon had a fall yesterday,' she explained, as the churchwarden followed her up the stairs; 'he got a nasty cut on the side of his head, and old Pharoah have a-broken both his knees dreadful!'

She seemed to attach more importance to Pharoah's injuries than to her master's.

Nat Snow did not stay upstairs long, and when he came down he asked for Celia.

'I don't like the look of your father this morning,' he said; 'I think he ought to see a doctor at once.'

'You mean that he is ill?' Celia said, paling; 'that he was more hurt than he supposed? He seemed quite well and cheerful when I went in an hour ago—only a little drowsy.'

'It is the drowsiness I don't like; and I can't get him to fix his attention, he is so full of a journey he has taken, or thinks he has taken, in the night. I shall have to act on my own responsibility. I think you should send a man over at once for Bryan.'

While the messenger was despatched to Barnstaple for a doctor, Celia sat in her father's room. He did not seem ill, she thought, only drowsy; he lay, propped up with pillows, calm and composed. When Celia spoke of the dreadful tragedy of the night, he did not betray any agitation. He was full, as Nat Snow had said, of a journey he had taken in his dreams. He had not taken the journey alone; he had an idea that his son had been with him.

'I left Frank at Simonsbath,' he said to her as she stood beside his bed arranging his pillows; 'he was too tired to come on, he wanted to rest. I had so much to

do I could not stay. There is a man in the village lying dead, and I was bound to be back for the funeral.'

'The funeral will not be for a day or two, father.'

'Don't tell me; it will be this afternoon,' he said irritably. 'Frank ought to be back in time. I don't know how I am to get on without Frank! Will you go downstairs and see if he has come yet?'

Celia obediently left the room on that futile errand. When she came back, he told her to leave the door of the room open, that he might hear when his son arrived.

The doctor from Barnstaple came before the day was over. He did not seem to think there was much amiss; a little concussion, and the wound in the temple was only superficial. He recommended quiet, and abstinence from all alcoholic liquors. In the old man's present feeble condition, a glass of whisky, he said, might bring on delirium.

It was as much as Celia and Janet could do all through that weary night to satisfy the dreadful craving that was on him for his accustomed potion; to prevent his getting out of bed and going downstairs to the cupboard in the room below.

'The jar's empty, maister,' Janet said, telling an unwilling lie, for her heart was sore to relieve the poor old man's distress. 'Every drop's clean gone! Eli shall get it a-filled as soon as ever it is light.'

The old man fell asleep just before dawn with this assurance. When he awoke the next day, his first question was for his son, not for the jar. 'Has Frank come yet?' he asked, when he opened his eyes.

'He'll be here presently, father,' Celia said, to satisfy him, mindful of the doctor's warning that he was not to be excited.

'His room must be got ready; tell Janet to get it ready at once. He was at Pinkery when I left him. There's a good woman at Pinkery; she let him sleep in

the barn. It'll not take him long to get over from Pinkery.'

When the doctor called at noon, he did not think so well of his patient. His mind was not any clearer. He answered his questions, but any effort to sustain his attention was beyond him.

'Don't 'ee think he could have just a drop o' whisky?' Janet asked the doctor, as she received his instructions for the day.

'Not a drop! If you give him a glass, half a glass, of whisky, I would not answer for the consequence,' the man of science said, and left the foolish old woman weeping in the passage.

'Much he knows about it!' she said, when the doctor had driven away. 'It's killin' the poor creetur, that's what it is, stoppin' his sperrit all of a suddint, when it's been meat an' drink to him all his life!'

There was some reason in old Janet's complaint. If he could not have his accustomed beverage, the patient would not have anything else. He declined the food that was brought to him from time to time; he could not be induced to let a spoonful pass his lips. And all through the dreadful days that followed, he was asking if Eli had come back with the jar. He would not believe Janet when she told him the village inn was shut up. He sent for Eli.

'It's quite true, maister,' the old man mumbled; 'the Red Deer's a-closed; if I was to knock at the door till doomsday 'twouldn't be opened. The man as would ha' opened it, is lying dead just inside. He've a-gone to his account—a precious bad one, I reckon—an' I've a-digged his grave. May the Lord ha' mussy on 'im—an' on all poor sinful souls!' he added, as his dim eyes rested on his old master's shrunken face on the pillow.

The Rector did not send Eli on any more errands

after this. He turned his face to the wall, and Celia fancied she saw his lips moving.

He did not take much notice of anything after this, he only asked for his son.

'Where's Frank?' he asked continually. 'He ought to be here by now. Is his room ready?'

To pacify him, Janet had to turn out the room on the other side of the landing, the room that his son used to occupy when he was at home. It had not been used since Frank went away, and it was full of lumber. The pictures that Frank had brought back from college were still on the walls—the boating groups, and the views of Oxford; his foils and gloves were still hanging above the mantelpiece and his fishing-rod in the corner, and the bookshelf was full of his old school books.

Janet turned out the room unwillingly.

'It's making a sight of dust for naught!' she grumbled.

Celia heard her knocking about the things in the room as she sat beside her father's bed, watching the daylight fade, and the grey winter twilight creep over the face of the sullen moors.

Janet was so busy banging about behind the closed door on the other side of the passage that she had not brought the lights, and Celia did not dare to leave her father a minute to get them. He might get out of bed if he were left alone a minute, and he would be down over the stairs to that dreadful cupboard before anyone could stop him.

'Where's Frank?' he asked suddenly, waking up from a dose.

'He has not come yet, father.'

'Not come yet? He was here a minute ago, with his mother—she brought him with her; she had him by the hand, and brought him over to the bed. She was sitting where you are a minute ago. She can't have gone—



she *must* be here now. Carry! Carry! where are you?’

The old man’s feeble voice broke into a wail as he called for the wife of his youth.

There was no response, only the sound of Janet’s broom in the adjoining room.

‘She is not here, father; she has not been here.’ Celia laid a soothing hand on his arm, which was outstretched in his wild appeal to his dead wife, as she spoke, but he pushed her away roughly.

‘How should you know? She is not your mother. She was here just now—she is here still—she is coming towards me with her dear smile that I have missed so much. Oh! Carry, why have you been away so long? Why have you left me alone so long?’

He was sitting up in bed, with his white hair pushed back and his eyes shining; his face was eager, and his arms outstretched.

Celia could not pacify him. She called in a quick voice for Janet to come to her aid, and with her help they got the old man back on the pillow.

‘You have sent her away!’ he moaned; ‘you have sent her away.’

‘Pack o’ nonsense! there’s naeboddy here,’ Janet said roughly; ‘you’ve bin a-dreaming.’

The old man shook his head; it was no dream to him. ‘She was here just now; she was standing where you are standing; she is here still. I hear her step—I could not mistake her step—Carry!’

He had sprung up again, his face all aglow, and his trembling arms stretched out to the empty air.

A knock at the door below sounded like an answer to his appeal. Neither of the watchers cared to leave him, and the knock was repeated while they stood listening beside the bed. Janet made a gesture to leave the room, but Celia implored her not to leave her.

'I will see who it is at the door,' she said; 'but oh! Janet, you must not leave him. I—I am sure he sees something—somebody—'

She went down the stairs with the distinct sensation of someone following her. Once she thought she heard the rustle of a woman's garment, and paused. The noise ceased when she stopped at the foot of the stairs, and it followed her like a whisper down the long, dark passage; when she reached the front door it stopped.

A man stood in the doorway when she threw the door back. She could not see him distinctly in the gloom, but the outline of the figure was familiar to her, and she thought she knew the voice.

He asked for her father. She never remembered what he said, and he stumbled rather than walked down the passage after her. She left him in the dark while she went to fetch a light. The man seemed as shadowy and unreal as the presence that had followed her down the stairs. Celia had an impression—a vague impression—that he was hurt in some way, that he had met with an accident, that he had come to the Rectory for assistance.

She had this in her mind as she carried the lighted candle into the dark room; but she was not prepared for what she saw, for the sight that greeted her.

A dishevelled, blood-stained figure, with matted hair and bloodless cheeks, and dark circles round the eyes, which were wild and bloodshot, and with clothes torn and rent and hanging in tatters about him.

Celia stood rooted to the spot; she did not put down the candle.

'Is my father here?' the man said hoarsely.

'Your father?'

'Tell him I have come home,' he said, not heeding her. 'I have been away a long time—I cannot remember how long, and I have come home to die—'

His voice was harsh and hoarse, more like the croak

of a raven than a human voice, and the face she saw by the light of the candle was more like the face of a famished, hunted animal than anything human.

‘You—you are Frank—’ she gasped. She was not surprised at seeing him there; but in that state.

There came a feeble cry from the room above; it was her father’s voice.

‘Tell my son to come upstairs,’ he cried. ‘What is he waiting for?’

Celia signed to the poor, tattered, bleeding wretch to follow her, and she went slowly up the stairs. It seemed to her that the whisper, the rustle of a woman’s dress that she had heard before, preceded her upstairs and stopped at the chamber door.

The man stumbled up behind her, and by the light of the candle she carried he saw the old man sitting up in bed.

‘Why have you stayed so long, Frank? Why did you not come before?’ he said when he saw the poor wretch standing on the threshold.

He tottered forward with a hoarse cry when he heard the old man’s words.

‘Father!’ he cried, ‘father!’

He was kneeling beside the bed, with his soiled face in the pillow, and his torn, bleeding hands clasped between the old man’s trembling palms.

‘My son!—my son!’

## CHAPTER XXVIII

### THE PRODIGAL'S RETURN

JANET hadn't got Frank Carmichael's room ready a moment too soon.

The prodigal had come back in such a plight that he was likely to want it for many weeks to come. He had been lying out for nights and days in the rain and mist and bitter winter cold, a hunted, homeless fugitive. His clothes were torn with creeping for shelter among the undergrowth, and his face was scratched and bleeding, and one arm was disabled.

He did not offer any explanation of his condition; he was past explaining.

When Janet led him back to the chamber he had occupied as a boy, he looked round the room with a dazed kind of wonder, and laid his head on the pillow with a low, sobbing sigh, and passed his bleeding hand across his eyes.

When he awoke a few hours later, he had forgotten he had ever been away; he thought he was still a boy again.

The injuries to his face and hands were only superficial, but the disabled arm was a more serious matter, and the chill from lying out so long had brought on an attack of pneumonia. He did not attempt to give any account of himself; only, when Celia suggested that a

doctor should be sent for, he caught her hand and drew her face down to the pillow.

'You must not let anyone know I am here,' he said hoarsely. 'Don't you know the police are after me? I thought I should be safe here—if anywhere. You won't give me up?'

'Of course we won't give you up!' Celia answered readily, but she thought the man was raving.

She told Janet what her brother—her step-brother—had said when she went back to her father's room. The old man had fallen asleep peacefully since his son's return. He had not expressed any surprise at his coming; he had taken it as a matter of course.

'Anyone could see he's in hiding,' the old woman said sharply; 'he wouldn't ha' come back if he hadn't got into trouble. I know Master Frank of old!'

'But he ought to see a doctor at once. Suppose anything should happen to him,' Celia said, turning pale at the thought.

'Bide awhile; he beant so bad that he can't hold on a day or two longer. We shall hear soon enough what he's ha' done; I shouldn't be a bit surprised if he ain't a-mixed up wi' that smugglin' lot.'

Then Celia suddenly remembered where she had seen the face, where she had heard the voice that had puzzled her. She went back to the sick man's room to make sure, but the white, drawn face on the pillow, the hollow cheeks and tangled hair, bore less resemblance to the Princess Bordone's dark-browed steward than to the beautiful portrait of the Rector's first wife in the room below.

But in spite of Frank Carmichael's altered looks, there could be no doubt of his identity with the adventurer who had passed as the Princess Bordone's steward. He had been living within three miles of his home for months past, among the people who had

known him in his youth, and no one had recognised him. How should they suspect that the daring adventurer who had ventured on such a bold stroke, was the wild, restless youth who had been brought up among them?

Celia's discovery of Elwood's identity with the Rector's lost son accounted for a good many things. A stranger would hardly have known the possibilities of the place, the security the situation of Gallantry Bower offered for lawless enterprise. No one but those who had been brought up in the neighbourhood would have known the moor so well, would have been familiar with the old traditions that gave a colour to any unusual sights and sounds. Frank Carmichael had laid his plans so well that he had almost defied discovery. But there had been a weak spot.

He cursed his fate for three whole days while he lay in hiding from the myrmidons of the law, stealing away among the dripping woods, or creeping stealthily beneath the undergrowth, famished and wounded and chilled to the bone. He had ceased to curse it when he found himself back in his own bed in his old room. After the first night, that miserable chapter of his life dropped out of his memory. He was babbling of the old days, of the moorland streams where he used to fish when he was a boy, when Celia came into his room the next morning.

The likeness to the steward of the Princess Bordone seemed to grow fainter each time she saw him; in the morning light it had almost disappeared. His beard had grown during those days of his wanderings, and a fair, silken moustache was visible on his upper lip. The blonde moustache and the blue eyes looked out of keeping with his raven-black hair and the bushy, black whiskers on his cheeks. Celia did not observe this; she only saw the alteration in his looks. She thought,

with this change in him, no one would recognise him. Janet shook her head when she spoke of the doctor seeing him. However great the change might be, there would be things to explain.

‘Nae, nae,’ she said, ‘better trust old Nance than the doctor. What’s the use o’ the doctor tending him if he’s carried off to jail when he’s brought him round?’

There was something in this, and Celia reluctantly consented to her grandmother being sent for. The old woman would keep silence at anyrate. It was no use asking the Rector what was to be done; he was lying weak and helpless as a little child in the other room. Since his son had come back, his anxiety seemed to have left him. He lay back on his pillow all day, calm and placid, taking little notice of anything around him, murmuring to himself about things that Celia could not understand, and people that she had never heard of.

It was dreadful to have two invalids on her hands; two men sick and delirious—perhaps dying—and no one to help her. More than once during the day Janet urged her to confide in her lover. He would be her husband soon, and there should be no secrets between them. Celia shivered when Janet spoke of the dreaded time that was so surely coming. She could not bring herself to confide in Nat Snow; it was not her secret, she argued; and besides, he had been the chief instrument in bringing about the capture of the smugglers—the police had been harboured in his house. It had been detectives in the disguise of workmen she had seen felling the trees in Gallantry Combe.

Old Nance came up to the house during the day, and saw the patient.

‘Ay, it’s Muster Frank hisself,’ she said, when she stood beside his bed and peered curiously down with her keen, old eyes into the wan face on the pillow; ‘but

what have come to his hair? It used to be yaller and wavy, like a gal's, an' now—' She stooped down and looked at the face more closely, at the fair, silken growth on the lip and chin, and she laughed to herself. 'Eh! eh!' she cackled; 'good now! he'd a-ta'en in t'ould one hisself, but he don't take in old Nance!'

She turned Celia and Janet out of the room while she attended to her patient. Celia left her alone with him unwillingly; she did not know what evil arts she might use.

Perhaps the old woman guessed what was in the girl's mind.

'Nay, nay, you may leave him to me,' she said; 'I'm not goin' to do him any harm. I knowed him afore you were born. He was allus a-coming to old Nance for traps for rabbits an' snares for game, and nets for the salmon an' sichlike. He was up to most things, wor Muster Frank, but he had bad luck, like the rest.'

Old Nance did not need to be told what had befallen Frank Carmichael. She knew more than they thought. But she kept a still tongue.

Half-an-hour later, when she called Celia into the room, a transformation had taken place in the appearance of her patient. The bushy, black beard and the coarse, jet-black hair had disappeared, and the yellow curls of his youth were again upon his brow. They were short, crisp, yellow curls, and his beard was fair, too, and thick, and his eyebrows were no longer black. No one who had seen Frank Carmichael half-an-hour ago would have recognised him for the same.

'There, now! What do you think of that?' the old woman said, with an air of triumph, pointing to her handiwork. 'No fear about his being taken now; he'd pass through the midst of 'em, an' they wouldn't know him! Tell your own tale an' call in the doctor; the arm is past my mending. I'll not meddle wi' it.'



It really did seem that with the black dye removed from his hair and beard there could be little risk in calling in a doctor. The transformation was so complete, together with the change that illness had wrought in his face, that detection seemed impossible.

When the surgeon from Barnstaple, who was attending his father, called the next day, Janet brought him into the room where he was lying.

‘Muster Frank have a-come back,’ she explained, in a mysterious whisper; ‘he’ve a-got into trouble in Lunnon, an’ the baileys are after him, an’ he’ve come down here to get out o’ the way o’ ’em. He had a nasty fall from his horse comin’ along in the dark—he didn’t care to be seen by daylight in the village—an’ he got a wetting.’

This explained the situation. But the doctor looked grave when he examined the patient.

‘This ought to have been attended to before,’ he said, running his hand over the injured arm. ‘Why did you not let me see him earlier? I have been at the house every day.’

‘It were his own wish; he were in mortal fright o’ the baileys; they’d got a writ out, or summat o’ the sort; he wouldn’t hear o’ it; he wouldn’t be persuaded. He wor in hiding, you see, an’ he was afeard to trust anyone.’

‘He need not have been afraid to trust me,’ the doctor said. ‘I brought him through more than one scrape when he was a boy. I was not likely to betray an old friend.’

With someone to share her secret, it seemed less difficult for Celia to bear; but she could not make up her mind to tell her lover. A hundred times a day she told herself that he ought to know that Frank had returned, that it ought not to be kept from him; but when the time came for his daily visit,

her courage failed her, and she let him come and go without speaking.

She fancied, sometimes, he knew. He avoided all reference to the events of that dreadful night; he did not speak of it after the first day or two. The police had left the village; there was nothing to detain them. Gallantry Bower, with its secrets, was a heap of charred timbers. The fire had destroyed every trace of its former occupants, and the pleasure yacht had steamed away.

The police had secured the booty and captured a couple of prisoners, but the rest had escaped, and the beautiful adventuress had flown—galloped away on the coal-black steed that had been the wonder and admiration of Exmoor.

With the disappearance of the police from the neighbourhood, the excitement in the village had subsided, and it had returned to its usual sluggish apathy.

There was a handsome young woman in a widow's cap presiding over the taps in the village inn. Beside 'the cows and the pigs and the shay-cart,' that had counted for so much in Susan's acceptance of the surly landlord of the Red Deer, there was a considerable sum of money, it was rumoured, lying in his name in a Cardiff bank. Whoever the money belonged to, it was invested in the name of Luke Field, and Susan's lawyers had advised her to claim it. She would be a rich woman if her claim were established; no wonder she held her head high and looked down on her old, humble admirers.

The inquest on the wretched man who had been shot, and the investigations of the police, had brought Nat Snow to the Red Deer a good deal during the first trying week, and he had advised the widow as to that sum of money lying in her husband's name in the bank. There was no one else in the place, with the parson lying sick—dying—up at the Rectory, and the Squire away to

advise about anything. The burden of the parish was laid upon the churchwarden, and it was clearly his first duty to look after the widow and the orphan.

His interest in Susan's affairs took him a good deal to the Red Deer about this time, and it may have been on one of these occasions he had learned the secret that Celia had been so anxious to conceal.

## CHAPTER XXIX

### NAT SNOW BUYS THE WEDDING RING

THE condition of the Rector of Stoke grew more serious day by day. As his physical frame grew weaker, his mind seemed to fail with it, to grow more like the mind of a little child.

He rambled in his talk continually, but was never violent, and he had forgotten all about that cupboard under the stairs. He spoke of Frank as if he had never been away. He understood, in some way, that he was ill, that he could not come to him, and he was always sending little tender messages across the landing to the room on the other side. When Janet brought up any dainty dish she had prepared for him, he would refuse to touch it, and send it to his son.

‘Take it away!’ he would say impatiently; ‘take it away! give it to Frank. He wants it more than I do. You must look after Frank.’

He babbled continually about his son and his dead wife, when he was awake and conscious, but for the most part he lay dozing, taking no notice of anything about him—slipping quietly away. There was no pain; only general failure, growing weaker and weaker day by day.

One day, when Celia was sitting with her father, Nat Snow came up into the room. He did not seem to

remember Nat at first, and he was past taking any interest in the affairs of the parish. It was only when his future son-in-law spoke of the wedding, when he urged that it should be no longer delayed, that he remembered.

Celia sat at a little distance, watching him, listening to the conversation, with her face white and motionless, and her hands folded before her in her lap. She had not thought much about her wedding lately ; she had hoped that it would be put off, that this illness of her father's would delay it.

'Then it is your wish that it should be next week?' Nat said to the Rector when he came away. 'There is no need to wait for banns ; I will get a licence. The parson who comes to take the service on Sunday will stay over Monday for the wedding.'

'The sooner the better—the sooner the better,' the old man said wearily. He did not seem to take any interest in the matter. When Nat left the room he began to talk of something else ; he dismissed the subject from mind.

'You heard what your father said !' Nat said to Celia when he went downstairs.

'Yes,' she said, 'I heard.'

'And you will be ready?'

'Ready!' she said, turning upon him almost fiercely. 'Do you expect me to be ready when my father is ill—dying? Do you think I would leave him at such a time?'

'I do not ask you to leave him,' he said humbly ; 'I am not so unreasonable as to wish to take you away from him ; but I want to have the right to look after you. No one can say any day what may happen—'

'You mean that my father will die?' she said unsteadily, with a break in her voice.

'Yes ; and there is another reason'—he looked at her keenly for a moment and went on—'you cannot expect

your secret to remain a secret long ; it is already whispered about the village.'

'My secret?'

'Yes, my dear, your secret. It has been no secret to me ; I have known all along.'

'You mean—about—Frank?' she said, with her face whitening.

He nodded.

'You managed very cleverly, but you did not deceive me. I knew the next day. This is no place for him ; if he is well enough to go away, he ought not to stay here a single day.'

'He is confined to his bed,' Celia said coldly, 'and his right place is here. If—if anything should happen to papa, it is right that Frank should be here. There would be so much to arrange, and I am only a girl, I should not know what to do.'

'There would be no need for you to do anything. I should be here to act for you. If you were my wife, I should have the right to look after your interests—'

'Please do not speak about my interests,' Celia said, breaking down, and a quick rush of tears coming to her eyes ; 'there is nothing here that is mine—everything belongs to Frank—'

'Do you know what you are saying?' he said, with a shrug of impatience—this girl's folly angered him in spite of himself. 'Do you know that Frank Carmichael is an outlaw—that an outlaw has no legal rights?'

Celia flushed and trembled.

'I do not understand,' she said ; 'I only know that everything here that belonged to papa and to Frank's mother, is his, not mine.'

'We'll see about that!' Nat said roughly. 'Perhaps the Rector 'll get better after all, and then there'll be no need to talk about it. But, in any case, the sooner Mr Frank clears off the better.'

Celia was not quite sure whether her lover's words were intended as a threat or a warning. She did not know how much he knew.

'He will not go away until he is well; you don't know how ill he has been; and I could not leave him—and papa. I am sure poor papa did not know what he was saying when you spoke to him just now; he could not have known; he would never have given his consent to my being married at such a time if he had known;—besides, there is no reason for this haste.'

'There is every reason,' Nat said hoarsely. He put his arm round the trembling girl and drew her to him. 'If I do not marry you now—now, while I can—how do I know that you will not deceive me?'

'I have promised; I am not likely to go from my promise,' Celia faltered.

He laughed scornfully. 'A fig for your promise! No, my dear, I'm not going to trust to a woman's promise. I have got your father's consent, and I'm not going to wait. Whether you are ready or not the parson is coming over from Lynton for the wedding on Monday. He will not leave Stoke until it is over. You can come back here after the ceremony, if you like; you can stay with your father as long as he needs you; but Mister Frank 'll have to shift for himself.'

Celia shivered, and would have drawn herself from his arms, but he held her tight. She was like a feather in his strong arms. She had to submit to his hateful caress, though her soul was sick with loathing. Perhaps he read something of her disgust, her aversion, in her eyes, in her shrinking form.

'Bah! how you hate me!' he said, releasing her, with a coarse laugh. 'I shall have to teach you to love me, my little innocent. You will have to swear to love me on Monday—to be my loyal and true wife.'

'I shall try to do my duty, but I shall never love you,' Celia said coldly. She was not afraid to speak the truth now; she did not feel so defenceless. Frank was in the house; somehow, she could not have explained to herself how, or why, his presence seemed to give her confidence. 'I ought to have told you so before; my engagement was a mistake—I was hurried into it. I did not know my own mind; I mistook my feelings. Now I know that I do not love you as a wife should—that if you are so cruel as to keep me to my word, I shall be unhappy all my life.'

She stopped with something like a moan. The picture of that hateful future that lay before her was more than she could bear, and she broke down with a pitiful little sob, and the tears swimming in her eyes.

'You should have found that out before,' Nat said roughly. 'It is too late to talk about it now. As to keeping you to your word, I'm not going to be made a laughing-stock of to the county; whether you love me or not, the wedding 'll come off on Monday. Perhaps I shall find out a way of making you love me after we are married, my dear. You wouldn't be the first bride who began by hating, and ended by loving.'

Celia shuddered, and shrank away from him when he would have taken her again in his arms.

'As you will,' he said, with an oath, letting her go. 'You will be mine on Monday; it will be no use you're showing any airs then.'

He went out and whistled to his sheep dog, who was waiting outside, and Celia saw him striding down the garden path with his head erect, and an air of mastership, which seemed to have grown upon him since the Rector's illness, as if the whole place belonged to him. The sight of his big, burly frame, his rude, lusty strength, filled her with sickening dread. The thought of the future that lay before her, with Nat Snow by her side, filled her with



a strange, numbing despair, that seemed to chill all her faculties.

Frank Carmichael noticed the cloud on his step-sister's face when she came into his room after that interview. He had heard Nat Snow's voice raised in anger in the room below, but he had not been able to catch the words.

'Sit down,' he said, motioning to a chair near the bed ; 'sit down and tell me what that man has been saying.'

Celia sat down obediently, and told him what Snow had said—that his secret was discovered.

'If he knew that I was here, why did he not give information before? why did he wait till now?' he asked, his pale face flushing, and his weak hands gripping the coverlet.

'He waited for—for papa's sake. I am sure he will not give you up, Frank, while papa is living. He will help you to get away.'

'Hang his help! I don't want any help from him,' the sick man said moodily. 'But there is another reason for his silence—you have not told me all.'

The colour stole up into Celia's white cheeks, and she dropped her face into her hands. She had never spoken of her engagement to Frank ; she did not know how to tell him.

'I—I am going to marry him,' she said unsteadily.

'Marry Nat Snow?'

'Yes ; papa has set his heart upon it. He wishes the wedding to come off at once. I am to be married on Monday.'

Frank whistled.

'The deuce!' he said. 'Why Monday? What is the reason of this haste?'

'I think the doctor has told him that papa is not likely to recover, and he wants to get it over—that—that if anything happens—he may look after me.'

'My dear child, if anything should happen, it would be my place to look after you. You are not driven to marry for the sake of a home—but perhaps you wish it?'

Celia shook her head.

'I would rather die!' she said.

He saw the despair in her face, the dread, the aversion she could not conceal.

'Why do you marry him, then?' he asked.

'Why?' She could not answer the question. Her eyes sank before his inquiring glance, and her face flushed painfully. 'I—I have promised to marry him,' she said.

'That is no reason. A great many girls promise and draw back; why should you not draw back if you feel like this?'

'It would please papa. He has set his heart upon it.'

She seemed to have no other reason to give.

'You have yourself to please first, not your father. The poor old man will not be here long, and you have your life before you. If the idea of this marriage is so hateful to you, why not tell the man the truth? Tell him you have mistaken your feelings. It is better for him to know now than to find it out after. He is not so very thin skinned that you need mind telling him.'

'It would be no use,' she said hopelessly, her eyes filling with tears.

'I would tell him myself if he were here. If I could get downstairs to speak to him, I would ask him what he meant by taking advantage of the weakness of an old man to ruin the happiness of a helpless girl. What right has he to force himself into the family? Let him keep to his own class. When he comes to-morrow, tell Janet to bring him up here. Hang him! I don't care if he has found me out. Let him do his worst!'

Nat Snow was not shown up into the room of his

future brother-in-law the next day, and the interview that Celia dreaded did not take place. He had gone to Barnstaple for a marriage licence, and to buy the ring. When he got back with the licence in his pocket-book, and the wedding ring in a bit of silver paper snugly tucked away in his waistcoat pocket, it was too late to go over to the Rectory.

When he called the next day on his way to church, it being Sunday morning, Janet informed him that the Rector was not so well. There had been a change for the worse during the night, and Celia had not been able to leave him. She had lain down for an hour's rest, and she could not disturb her. The churchwarden called again when the service was over, and Janet gave him the same answer, and refused to disturb her young mistress.

'Let her bide an' get a bit o' sleep while she can; she'll want all the strength she can get for what's before her,' the old woman said, as she closed the door upon the bridegroom elect.

Nat ground his teeth as he went down the Rectory path; he would not be put off like that another day.

In the afternoon, after the service, the curate who had come over from Lynton for the Sunday called at the house, and asked after the Rector, and Janet brought him upstairs.

'I thought he'd just say a prayer over him,' she said awkwardly; 'it won't do no harm.'

It had come to that. There was nothing more to be done for the Rector of Stoke at the last but to say a prayer over him. He had been praying for others—he had been repeating ordered words—in the church just outside his gate for fifty years, and now the time had come when other lips repeated the solemn, familiar words over him. He seemed to remember them as the curate knelt by his bedside, and his lips moved. But it was not the

Church's words he was repeating, it was the name of his dead wife.

'Carry!—Carry!'

The curate thought he understood, that the sacred message had pierced his dull brain; but Celia knew different.

'You have been here a great many years,' he said to the old man when he got up from his knees by the bedside—'over fifty. Few men have had the privilege to work in the vineyard so long. You have borne the burden and heat of the day—a long day—and you are going to your reward. The Master you have served is not unmindful of your labour.'

But the old man did not heed him.

'Carry! Carry!' he babbled, 'if you had been here, it would have been different.'

The curate went away with old worn formula on his lips. He was a young man, new to this part of the world, and he did not know anything of the life the dying man had led, of the neglected parish.

'Much good he've a-done him!' Janet said, as she stood wiping her eyes beside her master's bed.

The Rector lay babbling to himself during the night. He seemed to be walking in a twilight, to mistake the living for the dead. At daybreak he recovered consciousness for a brief interval, and asked for his son.

Frank Carmichael, with Janet's assistance, reached his father's bedside, but when he reached it, the old man had already forgotten him. The chills of death were on his brow, and his eyes, which were already glazing, were fixed on the white ceiling. A look of glad surprise was on his face, and his lips were moving. It was not his son, it was his dead wife he was greeting.

'Oh, Carry, you have been long away! You shou'd

have stayed with us—we could not go on without you.'

'Yes,' Frank Carmichael said bitterly, falling on his knees beside his father's dying bed. 'We could not go on without you—'

## CHAPTER XXX

### THE LANDLADY OF 'THE RED DEER'

THE old Rector died at daybreak; the morning of Celia's wedding day. There could be no wedding with her father lying stark and cold in that upper room, and Celia crying her eyes out in her darkened chamber.

When Nat Snow called later in the day, Janet did not admit him into the house. She kept him standing at the door.

'Maister Frank have a-made all arrangements about the funeral,' she said shortly. 'It wor a mussy he come back in time, for missy is a-taking on awful! He's a-acting for her an' for hisself, an' he don't want no help from anyone.'

She closed the door in the churchwarden's face, and left him fuming in the porch.

He went home in a rage, and wrote a pressing letter to Celia demanding an interview, and the messenger who carried it to the Rectory waited for her reply. She did not take long to reply. She begged to be left undisturbed until after the funeral; and she did not say a word about the wedding.

He had no alternative but to wait. He could not force himself into her presence.

Susan Field came up to the Rectory the night before the funeral. She came up in her new widow's weeds. Celia

hardly recognised her in her widow's black. Her good looks had come back to her, and she was handsomer than ever. Handsome in a red and white, full-lipped way, like the women Rubens loved to paint.

There was something in Susan's handsome, reckless face that struck Celia when she came in. It was the first time they had met since that terrible morning when Susan had been summoned in haste; when she had heard her moaning outside her chamber door. In this time of her sorrow—on the eve of her father's funeral—Celia might have looked for a visit of condolence from her near kinswoman, but there was no sympathy in Susan's dark eyes, which were bright and defiant, and there was a red spot burning on her brown cheeks.

'Won't you sit down, Susan?' Celia said, seeing the girl remained standing. 'I did not expect to see you; I did not think you could get away.'

'There's no difficulty about getting away now,' Susan said, tossing her head. 'I'm my own missis. I've got no one to hinder me now; an' for the matter o' that, I could give up the place to-morrow if I liked. I've no call to keep it on.'

'No,' said Celia, absently. She had not much interest in the Red Deer—whether Susan kept it on or not.

'No! I've got no call to do nothing. Luke have left me plenty to live upon—to live like a lady.'

At another time Celia would have smiled at the thought of Susan living like a lady, but she did not smile to-day; she looked up with a questioning air.

'I did not know—' she began, but Susan stopped her.

'Of course you don't know!' she said scornfully; 'no one expected you to know! You are so tooked up wi' your wedding—wantin' to get it over while the passon lay a-dying—that you take no count o' nothin' else.'

Celia's pale face flushed. Something in the girl's voice, some covert insolence, brought the blood to her cheeks.

'I don't understand,' she said; 'it was papa's wish to get the wedding over; he wanted to see me married before he died.'

'An' now he's a-gone,' Susan said eagerly, 'will it make any difference? Will the wedding go on?'

'I don't think you have any right to ask me this question,' Celia said, flushing and haughty. 'My wedding can have nothing to do with you.'

'It has more to do wi' me than you think for,' Susan said, with a sudden passion in her voice; 'he was my lover afore he was yours.'

'Your lover!'

'Ay; an' he'd a-married me, if it hadn't bin for t'owld dame a-interferin'. He telled me so hisself when I came away; when Dame Snow turned me to doors. He wor in a fine tear wi' t'owld woman, but he couldn't go agin her; he couldn't help hisself.'

'Married you, Susan—you?'

Celia could only repeat the words helplessly, with a sickening sense of shame that her lover—the man she had promised to marry—had been the lover of this girl. She could not understand a man who loved her loving Susan.

'Yes, me; why shouldn't he love me? I'm as good as you any day, if I haven't got your fine lady ways! He couldn' a-bear me out o' his sight when I was up at the farm; he'd follow me all over the place, when I was a-milkin', or scaldin' the cream, or out in the wood-house choppin' sticks; he never lost a chance o' being wi' me. He loved the very ground I walked on! Do you see this? He brought me this back from Barnstaple Fair.' She pulled a blue ribbon out from her bosom with a silver locket attached to it while she spoke, and thrust



it before Celia's eyes. There was a likeness in it of Nat Snow. 'He give this to me, an' told me to wear it in my bosom—next my heart—an' I have worn it there ever since. Luke found it out afore I'd been married a week, an' that was the beginning of his ill-using me. I thought he'd a-killed me when he saw it round my neck. I didn't care if he did kill me; I didn't care what happened to me. I hated him, an' I loved Nat,—an' I up and told him so.'

'You told your husband?' Celia said, in a startled voice. She thought the girl was beside herself.

'Ay, I wasn't afraid to tell! I wasn't ashamed of it, an' I ain't ashamed now. I love Nat; I've always loved him. The child's his and not Luke's,—an' he knows it. He's only got to whistle, an' I'd up an' go to him any hour of the day or night;—nothing should stop me.'

The girl's black eyes were blazing, and her full lips quivering with excitement, and her bosom heaving as she laid her soul bare to Celia.

She only paused to get breath, and went on with strange, headlong fury.

'What should you know of love?' she said scornfully. 'You've never hungered an' thirsted for a word from him—for a look—as I have. You've never wanted to catch at his hand as he's gone by, to take his head in your arms an' kiss it—kiss it—kiss it! You've never longed to have his arms about you, an' feel there was no one else in the world but he an' you.'

Celia shuddered, and shrank away from her. She thought she was a mad woman.

Susan noticed the movement, the withdrawal of her hand from the table, where she had flung the silver locket with the likeness of her lover.

'Ay, you may shrink away; I don't care for your shrinking! I don't care who knows. I love him! I love every stone he walks upon. I am like one of his

dogs. If he were to strike me, to kick me away from his feet, I should crawl back ; I should love him all the same !'

The girl's whole soul was in her voice and in her eyes. Celia had never seen a woman so moved, and a strange terror came into her face, and the blood left her lips.

'Why do you tell me all this ?' she asked faintly.

'Why ? Because you ought to know ! If you are going to marry him, it's right you should know he belongs to another woman ; you should marry him with your eyes open.'

'If this is true, I will never marry him,' Celia said, her mouth quivering. It frightened her to see Susan standing there, pouring out her shameful tale. She would have stopped her ears if she could, but she was like one numb and paralysed.

'Never marry him !—do you mean it ? Oh, Cicely, for your own sake—for my sake—let him go ! He will never love you as he loved me. For the love of God, let him go !'

The girl had flung herself in a fit of sobbing at Celia's feet, and was clinging wildly to her skirts ; her pent-up passion had found vent. It seemed as if her life were breaking within her. The hope that Celia's words had awakened had broken down all her reserve ; she had let herself go. Susan had always been emotional and easily excited ; she had never known any self-control.

Celia trembled, and would have risen from her chair, but the girl clung to her knees ; she would not let her go.

'For the love of God—' she sobbed.

'Oh, hush ! hush ! you must not say that !—and you must not kneel to me. Get up, Susan—you don't know what you are doing ; get up.'

'I will not get up until you promise you will never have naught to do wi' him,' Susan sobbed.

'I will make no promises ; I will have nothing to do with this shameful scene.' And Celia struggled to rise, but the girl detained her.

'You shall not move until you've promised,' she said sullenly.

'We'll see about that !' It was Janet's voice in the doorway, and the old woman bustled into the room. 'Hoity-toity ! what do you mean by frightening missy here ? Get up, you baggage !'

But Susan did not wait to be adjured to get up. She rose quickly from her knees with an angry, convulsive sob. 'Baggage yourself !' she said, pushing Janet roughly aside, and taking up the cloak she had thrown on a chair. 'You'd be a bit more civil if you knew who you were a-speaking to.'

'Know who I'm a-spakin' to !' screamed the old woman.

'Hush, oh, hush !' Celia said, coming between them. 'Susan is in trouble.'

'Trouble or no trouble, she bean't a-coming here wi' her ravin'. I know her of old, allus a-ravin' an' a-tearin', if her can't get her own way. If her's in trouble, let her go to t'owld woman at Wytchanger. We've got trouble enow o' our own here, wi'out hers.'

'Granny's gone away from Wytchanger,' Susan said sullenly. 'Her have been gone a week sin'.'

'Gone away !' Janet repeated, raising her hands in astonishment. 'Nance Lake gone away from Wytchanger ! I heard tell her house wor shut up. Eli was up for some yarbs for the cow a week sin', an' he could make no one hear. They telled him at Pinkery she wor stayin' wi' you.'

'She was stayin' wi' me till the night that passon died, her wouldn't stay no longer, an' her went away in a tear, an' I haven't seen her sin'.'

'What did her go away in a tear for ?' Janet inquired.

She had her doubts about Susan; she had heard that things did not go on smoothly at the Red Deer.

'Her interfered wi' me. Nat looked in to tell me passon were dead, an' he stayed till the house was shut up, an' Granny came downstairs an' caught him in the bar, an' her let him have a bit o' her tongue. If it had bin me I shouldn't ha' cared, but her flew at he, an' I interfered between 'em. I tould her her'd better clear out, I'd a right to have who I liked in my own house, an' if Nat 'ud stay, stay he should. Her tooked me at my word, an' her went away in a rage, mutterin' to her-sel'. Much good her mutterin's did! I hanged up a horse-shoe over the door when she were gone; I hanged it up *inside out*. I broke the spell she wor working; it would fall on her own head; it couldn't come a-nigh me.'

'You don't mean you turned her out? It were an awful night, I mind, not fit to turn a dog out in,' Janet said, in awe-stricken tones.

'I didn't turn her out; her went away wi' her own mind,' Susan said, in an injured voice.

'An' her haven't bin heard of sin'? Mark my word, something's happened to old Nance. Her's not the sort to shut up her house an' go away wi'out a word. Her ought to be searched for. If passon were alive, he'd drag the pool. I never could abide that Pinkery pool!'

Susan shrugged her shoulders, but her face paled at old Janet's forebodings.

'You'd better drag it yoursel',' she said scornfully. She went over to the door with her head held high, and her bold, handsome eyes angry and defiant. When she reached the door a softening mood came over her, and she came back quickly to where Celia was standing.

'You will forget what I said about Nat?' she said humbly. 'I was beside myself. I did not know what

I was saying. You will not tell Nat—you will not betray me, Cicely?’

‘Of course I shall not tell Nat!’ Celia answered, flushing and haughty.

‘And you will keep your promise?’

‘I have made no promise!’ Celia said coldly.

Though she hated him, she could not promise Susan what she asked. She shrank away from her with a shudder. It seemed a defilement, as if she had been scorched by the hot blast of the girl’s fierce, unrestrained passion.

Janet’s suspicions about Pinkery pool, about something having happened to Nance Lake at the ill-omened spot she would have had to pass to reach Wytchanger on that stormy night when Susan turned her out of doors, were in Celia’s mind all through the evening. Her nerves were overstrung, and that miserable scene with Susan had shaken her. She was weak and hysterical all the evening after Susan had gone, and when night came she begged Janet not to leave her.

‘Don’t you be afeard, my lammie,’ the old woman said, when she awoke in the night and saw the girl sitting up in bed, with a white, listening look in her face, and her eyes wide and startled; ‘don’t you be afeard o’ sperrits; they won’t harm you. The passon’s a-lying cold an’ still in his coffin; he knaws better nor to be stirrin’ ’bout agin so soon. He’s had stirrin’ enough in his time, I reckon; he’s glad to bide awhile.’

‘It isn’t that,’ Celia said; ‘I’m not afraid of poor papa. Why should I be afraid of him now, more than when he was living? I—I thought I heard someone with a crutch on the stairs.’

‘Old Nance?’

Celia did not answer; she held up her finger. There was a sound outside, on the landing, as of a halting step,

but it passed her door. The room her father had occupied was at the other end of the passage, and it seemed to her, in her tense, excited state, that the halting footstep went on down the passage and paused there.

Janet had heard the sound too, but she resolutely buried her head in the bedclothes.

'It has stopped at papa's door. Did you hear it, Janet?' Celia said under her breath.

'I heard naught,' the old woman said decidedly.

'But you *must* have heard it.'

'I never hears what I don't want to hear,' Janet said stubbornly. 'Go to sleep, my lammie; no good comes o' listenin'. Say your textes, an' don't be worritin' about sperrits; they can't harm ye if ye gie 'em a tex or two.'

It was the old comforting formula that used to allay Celia's fears of the dark when she was a little child, but the old woman's voice was not so assured to-night; there was an unusual quaver in it, and she heard her mumbling a text to herself under the bedclothes.

It was still dark when Janet groped her way down the stairs the following morning. She hurried past the closed door of the Rector's room. She remembered what was behind in the darkness and gloom, and she looked resolutely before her, shading the rushlight she carried with her trembling hand.

'It were old Nance, sure enuf!' she muttered to herself, as she knelt before the hearth and raked the wood embers together into a flame; 'I couldn't mistake her limp.'

Old Eli came in with a dreadful story at daylight. A shepherd, going after some sheep he had missed on the hills, had passed by Pinkery pool, and seeing in the dim light something white floating on the surface, had got a branch from a neighbouring thorn, and drawn it in. Instead of the fleece of the sheep he was looking for, it was the white face of Nance Lake. The man had left the

body on the marge ; he had been afraid to pull it ashore, and he had ran back to the village to give the alarm.

'I knowed her wor dead ; I knowed something had happened to her,' Janet confided to the old man, as they sat talking about the discovery over their early meal. 'Her wor here last night ; I heard her come limping up the stairs as plain as I heerd you come in just now, an' her stopped at the maister's door.'

'You wor a-dreamin', most like,' Eli remarked severely ; 'the maister weren't zackly what he might ha' been, but he never had naught to do wi' witches.'

'What is that you are saying about witches?' Celia asked. She had come down the stairs unnoticed, and was standing in the doorway. 'It was not Granny you heard last night, Janet. What should Granny Lake want with papa? It was poor old Rover. He is lying on the mat outside papa's door now.'

'It was no dog I heard climbin' the stairs, it wor old Nance,' Janet said, shaking her head. 'It were a sperrit if ever there were a sperrit !'

Janet was not so sure when she went upstairs a little later, and found the old dog stretched out stiff and stark on the mat outside the door of that darkened room.

## CHAPTER XXXI

### 'UN MAUVAIS QUART D'HEURE'

NAT SNOW did not come up to the Rectory again until the day of the funeral. He joined the little procession in the porch, and the white-robed curate, who had spoken at the old man's bedside of the reward that awaited the labourer when his day's work was over, came down between the graves to meet it. While he was speaking of the Resurrection and the Life, Nat Snow was wondering who the stranger was who walked with Celia bare-headed behind the Rector's coffin.

A great many other people wondered too.

A tall, gaunt figure, looking taller by reason of his gauntness; a man who had passed his first youth, tall and fair, with a soft silken moustache, and a big yellow beard, and waves of crisp yellow hair falling over his forehead. A stranger with an air of distinction, and a clear-cut profile that some of the older people of the village who stood near thought they had seen before. They could not remember at the time where they had seen it—in a picture, or in a woman's face.

Celia in her black gown walked beside the stranger, with her hand on his arm, and together they stood beside the grave. As Frank Carmichael stood there, with the wintry sunshine on his bare head and his pale, worn face, that illness had changed and refined, and the



wind stirring his yellow curls, a murmur went through the crowd.

‘It’s Mister Frank ; Mister Frank have come back !’

As the mourners left the yard, the villagers fell aside to let them pass, and the women dropped their curtseys, and the men touched their hats ; they forgot the occasion in their eagerness to welcome the wanderer back.

‘He haven’t a-altered a bit !’ an old woman said who remembered him as a boy. ‘I mind him a-runnin’ by his mother’s side, wi’ his yaller curls a-streamin’ in the wind. She was mortal proud o’ his curls. He’d never a-gone wrong if she had a-lived.’

They buried the Rector of Stoke beside his wife on the windy hill, among the flock he had served for fifty years. The rain beat upon the open grave, and the winter wind blew over it with a shrill cry when the mourners had left the yard.

‘He worn’t a bad sort o’ a gentleman, an’ he wor a fine preacher onst, when the first missus was a-living, but he had a-many ways wi’ ‘un,’ the old rustic said who helped Eli dig his master’s grave. This was his epitaph after fifty years’ work.

‘He worn’t a bad sort o’ a gentleman, but he had many ways wi’ ‘un.’

Nat Snow came up to the Rectory to see his promised bride after the funeral. The sight of her white face and her heavy eyelids would have moved most men, but it did not move Nat. He looked at her keenly. Her mouth was drawn tight with an expression of pain, but it was firmer, and there was something in her face he had not seen in it before.

He gave a swift glance round the darkened room when he entered, but the stranger was not there ; Celia was alone. She did not give him her hand when he came in ; she stood aloof, with the table between them.

‘I—I am glad you have come,’ she said, speaking

slowly in a voice she tried to keep steady ; 'I wanted to speak to you about the marriage—'

'You want it put off,' he said, interrupting her roughly ; 'you want to make this an excuse for further delay ?'

'No, I do not want it put off,' she said calmly. 'I want you to release me from my engagement.'

'Release you from your engagement ! Do you take me for a fool ?' he said, with a coarse laugh. 'I've got your promise, and your father's promise, you can't go back from that, my dear ; you are as good as married to me now. I've got the licence in my pocket, and the ring is somewhere.' He fumbled in his waistcoat pocket, and brought out a crumpled bit of silver paper and flung it on the table, and the ring fell out. Celia shuddered.

'Yes,' she said unsteadily, 'you have got my promise, but I was a child when I gave it ; I did not know. You will not be so ungenerous as to bind me by a promise that I gave in ignorance—that I have regretted ever since ?'

He stared at her in sullen silence, with his brow lowering and his dark, swarthy face a dull brick-dust hue.

'Look here !' he said, with brutal candour, 'you may as well understand, first as last, that it is no use making a fuss. The wedding will come off, whether you like it or not. You cannot escape from it. You don't know Nat Snow if you think he ever gives up what he has set his heart upon.'

'I know that I shall never marry you,' Celia said quietly ; 'I would die rather.' She was very pale, but her lips were firm. She was not afraid of him now.

'Do you know what you are saying ?' he said savagely. 'Do you know that your father pledged his word to me ; that he was in my debt ; that year after year he borrowed money of me ; that everything in this place—every stick of furniture, every bit of plate, every picture on the wall—belongs to me ?'

'Papa is dead,' Celia said simply.

'Exactly ; and you want to escape from the compact. Not so fast, my dear ! That precious brother of yours has been setting you up. He thinks I am not good enough for his respectable family.'

There was a covert sneer in the man's words ; his eyes were hot and angry, and his brow was as dark as a thundercloud.

'It is not that,' Celia said coldly ; 'it is because I do not love you.'

'Bah !' he said brutally, 'don't talk to me about love ! I never supposed you did love me ; but that makes no difference. You will marry me all the same. Look here,' he said, bringing his great hand down on the oak table with a blow like a sledge-hammer, 'I'm not going to stand any more nonsense ! If you can't be reasonable, you must take the consequences. Do you know that that precious brother of yours is in my power ? At a word from me he would be taken off, with handcuffs on his dainty wrists, to Barnstaple jail. There is nothing between him and transportation, but your promise. If you choose to be reasonable and keep your word, he can go free ; if not—if you play me false—by heaven ! you'll have cause to repent it ! I give you till to-morrow to make up your mind.' He strode across the room with his heavy footsteps, making the furniture shake and the silver cups on the sideboard rattle. When he reached the door he stopped and looked back. 'Mind, no shilly-shallying,' he said. 'It will have to be "Yes" or "No."'

'There will be no shilly-shallying,' Celia said to herself when he was gone ; 'at the utmost, he could but kill me !'

She told Frank what Nat Snow had said when he had gone away ; but he only laughed at her fears. 'You will not need to sacrifice yourself for me, little sister,' he

said; 'when your churchwarden comes again, he will have to deal with me.'

Celia did not know what he meant; he had been busy going through her father's papers during the week, and she did not know what he had found. It was fortunate Frank Carmichael was there to go through them; if she had been alone when this had happened, there would have been no one but Nat Snow to go through the papers the Rector had left behind, to sort, and sift, and burn and destroy at his will.

An hour after the interview with her lover, when the dusk was falling, a travelling carriage drove rapidly up to the Rectory gate. For a moment Celia thought that the men that Nat had spoken of had come for Frank, and she half rose from her seat in terror.

'Oh, God!' she said, in a sudden panic, with a dreadful feeling clutching at her throat. 'Oh, God!'

As the words died on her lips, the door of the room opened, and someone came in. She had not the courage to look up; she sank back in her chair and covered her face with her hands. There was a sound of someone speaking a long way off.

'I am come too late; the funeral has already taken place, I hear. I came as soon as I heard.' It was Geoffrey Bluett who was speaking, and he was standing before her.

'You—you here!' she said tremulously; 'I thought you were abroad.' Her face was quivering with emotion; it seemed that her great longing had brought him back.

'I was in Paris when I heard,' he said; 'I only reached London last night, and I have been travelling ever since. You did not think I should stay away?'

Celia did not answer him. She put out her hand, and before he could take it she drew it back; she remembered Frank was under the same roof with the man he had deceived.

'What have I done? Have I offended you?' he asked, in a voice that was hurt and surprised; but Celia covered her face with her hands; she could not answer him.

'Oh, you don't know—you have not heard,' she said.

'About your wedding?' he said. 'The man who drove me here told me you were to have been married to-day.'

His voice sounded harsh to her in his effort to keep it steady.

'No, it is not that,' she said; 'I am not likely to be married now. It is about someone else. Frank has come back.'

'Frank come back! I hope he was in time; I hope he was reconciled to his father?'

'Yes, oh, yes! there was nothing to forgive. Time had blotted it all out. Papa was so glad to have him back, he had forgotten that there had ever been a difference.'

'That is as it should be; life is too short for grievances—for angry feelings.'

She looked at him for a moment with questioning eyes; she thought he had heard.

'Do you speak for yourself?' she said, with a tremor in her voice; 'do you think, if he had injured you, you could forgive?'

His sunburnt cheek paled a little beneath the tan, and a change passed over his face.

'If what I hear—what I surmise is true,' he said gravely, 'Frank Carmichael has injured himself more than he has injured me.'

'You have heard, then?' she gasped.

'Yes, I have heard.'

'And yet you come here?'

He looked down at her with a grave smile.

'My dear,' he said, 'whatever folly Frank Carmichael may have been guilty of would not affect you; would not

prevent my coming here if you needed me. If he is in trouble, there is more reason for my coming. I would gladly help him for the old time's sake. And you—'

He did not finish the sentence, but he looked at her wistfully, and a sudden warmth stole into her white cheeks.

'Frank is in dreadful trouble,' she said; 'Mr Snow has threatened to give him up to the police unless—unless—' She stopped in some confusion, and hung her head. 'He is coming for his answer to-morrow,' she faltered.

She had not intended to say so much, and a sudden scarlet overspread her white cheeks.

'What answer does he expect?' Geoffrey asked.

'Oh, I don't think you must ask me that!' she said, covering her hot face with her hands.

He had no need to ask her. Celia's scarlet cheeks and drooping head told him what the alternative was. He muttered an impatient oath, and ground his heel in the old Turkey carpet, and the lines about his mouth hardened.

'I will see Mr Snow when he comes to-morrow,' he said. 'After I have seen him, you can give him his answer.'

'You!' she said, 'you! Oh! you don't know all—you have not heard—'

'Yes,' he said, smiling at her earnestness, 'I think I know—and what I don't know, Frank will tell me.'

There were explanations to be gone into, and a confession to be made, when the friends who had parted in boyhood met again after a lapse of eighteen years.

The game was up. There was nothing to be gained by holding back, and Frank Carmichael was too broken by the disastrous result of his wild venture to hold anything back.

It was a shameful story, it was not fit for Celia's ears but the pale portrait over the mantelpiece looked down

out of the dingy frame while the broken-down man at the table, with his head in his hands, poured out the story of his wasted youth, and the wild project which he had hazarded to retrieve his ruined fortunes.

It was in France he had fallen in with a band of desperate men ; they had eagerly embarked on the daring enterprise, and at a theatre in Paris he found a tool ready to his hand. Reine Valjean, a beautiful circus rider, was willing for the sake of *les beaux yeux* to give up the stage, and play a new part at the bidding of her lover. She had played it well enough while the fit lasted, but when her affection began to cool, and she grew wearied of the loneliness and dreariness of the wet, shadowy west country, she grew reckless, and set people talking.

If Reine Valjean had only had patience to go on as she began—to play her part as the Princess Bordone—there would have been no occasion to burn down Gallantry Bower.

She had been as great a sufferer by the enterprise as the rest. She had lost all. She had ridden away with only the handful of trinkets she could get together, that she could carry with her, and she had left everything behind her.

The only gainer by the destruction of Gallantry was Geoffrey Bluett. The big, tumble-down family mansion, and the old, worm-eaten furniture were insured at double their value. When the insurance was paid, Geoffrey would be a rich man ; there would no longer be any occasion for him to live abroad.

The Squire was closeted with Frank Carmichael until late into the night, until the grey dawn appeared in the eastern sky ; and when Nat Snow called the next day for Celia's answer, it was he not Celia who received him. The churchwarden was shown into the dark, gloomy room where he had had so many transactions with the old Rector. The long oak table was covered with papers,

and the old silver inkstand that he remembered so well, had been polished up afresh ; but the silver cups were missing. There was no foaming tankard on the table to-day ; but there was a deed box that he knew well open before the stranger, who sat at the end of the long table, and the papers he had taken out were neatly arranged and docketed at his side.

Nat Snow gave a swift glance round the dusky room, but Celia was not there ; only the two men at the table, the Rector's deed box, and the papers spread about. The big armchair the old man used to sit in was drawn up empty beside the hearth.

He had not expected to see the Squire ; he believed him to be still abroad ; but he knew the stranger again as the man he had seen at the funeral the previous day.

For the first few moments he took him for a lawyer who had come down to settle the affairs of the dead man, but only for a moment. Geoffrey Bluett's first words dispelled the illusion.

'My friend, Mr Carmichael, and I,' he said, without any preliminary greeting, 'have been looking through the papers of the late Rector'—indicating, with a wave of his hand, the stranger who sat at the head of the table—'and we have come across some irregularities which perhaps, as churchwarden, Mr Snow, you will be able to explain.'

Nat had hardly heard the last words ; he was looking across the table at the stranger at the other end. Mr Carmichael ! The man before him, if this were Frank Carmichael, was not the black-browed man he had known as the Princess Bordone's steward. There was a mistake somewhere.

'I do not understand—' he began, looking from one to the other.

'No, I suppose not,' said the Squire. 'Mr Carmichael, as his father's representative, will explain.'



There could be no doubt about the identity of the stranger with the young man who had gone away eighteen years ago. Nat remembered him again; the yellow wavy curls, the light silken moustache, the pale, clear-cut face—he could not mistake him; and his likeness to the woman who looked sadly down upon them from dark panelled walls. The mistake had been his. He had been duped; believing every idle tale. His threats to Celia had been vain, a mere idle boast to terrify her.

The room swam before his eyes, and a cold sweat broke out upon his forehead. A rapid change passed over his face, not merely the deepening of the lines—a look of blank bewilderment and dismay.

He did not hear what the other was reading—the indictment against him. All his coolness had deserted him. He only heard, as in a dream, that the trickery, the plotting, the scheming of all these years had come to naught; that the deeds the old man had signed were not worth the paper they were written upon; and last of all, the land he had filched from the Church had to be restored, and an account rendered of the timber that had been cut in Gallantry Combe.

Nat Snow got up sick and giddy from the interview. He had never thought that anyone would go through those papers. He thought it would be all in his own hands. He sat humbled and dumb while the charges were made against him. He had not the spirit to defend himself.

‘There is an account with the Rector,’ he said hoarsely, ‘a private account, which you have not gone into. I have lent him a good deal of money—’

‘Whatever money you have lent my father will be repaid,’ Frank Carmichael said haughtily, when the churchwarden rose to go; ‘and any other claim you have upon the estate will be met—in due course—by the lawyers.’

He had risen from his seat to make the churchwarden’s departure easier, and he stood leaning with his arm upon the mantelpiece beneath the picture of his mother, while the farmer fumbled on the floor beside his chair for his hat.

‘Is there anything more you have to say to me—any other claim to make?’ he demanded, as the other moved across the room to the door.

Nat Snow stopped half-way and straightened himself.

‘No,’ he said defiantly, ‘I have not any other claim to make, but maybe other people have.’

It was a Parthian shot—a bow drawn at a venture.

## CHAPTER XXXII

‘MY LOVE, MY WIFE!’

WHEN the churchwarden had gone, Geoffrey Bluett went to find Celia. He wanted to tell her the result of Nat Snow’s visit—that he had already had his answer. He had heard from Frank Carmichael the story of the persecution she had suffered at the hands of this man, the threats that he had used to induce her to consent to the marriage.

Geoffrey had hardly been able to keep his hands off the fellow as he sat on the other side of the table, turning from red to white, while his fraudulent schemes were being laid bare. He was glad now he had refrained; he would not mix Celia’s name up with Nat Snow; he would not drag it in the mud.

Celia was not in the house. She had gone out, Janet said, when Mr Snow came in. She had gone in the direction of the church.

Geoffrey had not far to seek her. He found her beside the new-made grave of yesterday. She looked a pathetic little figure standing there in her black, with her white hands clasped before her, and her face turned to the sinking sun. There was a crimson sunset light over the moor, and all the distant heights were peaks of shining gold. The rosy sunset was on Celia’s pale face, and her eyes were full of tears. She did not see him until he was beside her. His face was pale with passion as

he came towards her, and his lips trembled; he could not keep them steady. He did not know how to tell her she was free. Perhaps she read the message in his eyes.

'Dear!' he said, taking her little cold hands, that hung down, 'there is no one now to come between us, and—and I love you.'

He did not need to say any more; the little lonely figure by the side of the grave was swaying unsteadily, and he had to put his arm around her to support her.

'And Frank?' she murmured.

'Never mind Frank. Frank can take care of himself,' he said impatiently. 'You are mine now, Celia, mine—I will never give you up again! There will be no more partings.'

She did not answer him. She made no resistance. She let him draw her to his side. 'My love, my wife!' he said.

He drew her gently to him. It seemed right he should take her in his arms at that spot—it was like a sacred charge. She did not know how the touch of her lips, the pressure of her hands, were stirring in him depths that he thought were long since buried, were awakening in him a new sense of duty, of responsibility; how the years rolled back and his lost youth came again to him in that supreme moment.

As they walked back, hand in hand, with the evening colours of glory shining on the summits of the hills, there was a light on Celia's face, in her eyes—not the light of sunset, the sun had already sunk below the hill—the light on the face of the woman he loved that had never yet shone for him on land or sea.

. . . . .

What more is there to tell? The marriage licence which Nat Snow had taken that journey to Barnstaple to obtain was not wanted after all; and the wedding ring— An

unusual fate happened to the wedding ring ; it was not wasted. It was exchanged not long after for a wider circlet to fit a less slender finger. It was a pity the licence couldn't be exchanged too.

Nat found out, not long after his disappointment and humiliation, that the money deposited in Luke Field's name in the Cardiff bank was all right. There was no one to dispute its possession with the publican's widow. He may have had his own doubts as to how so large a sum should have been lying to the credit of a smuggling rascal of an innkeeper, but he kept them to himself. It is lying at his credit now at the principal bank in Barnstaple, and Susan is the mistress of Letcombe Farm. 'T'owld missus,' as the men and maids about the place still call Nat's mother, is still living with her son ; but her reign is over ; she is always threatening to go away. Perhaps Susan will not be sorry when she goes.

Tom Lake and his crony, the wrestler, Susan's old lover, have left the shores of an ungrateful country, and are working—or poaching, it is much the same thing—in the backwoods of Australia. Old Nance was buried in the churchyard beside the son who had been killed in the poaching affray in Gallantry Woods, and the daughter who had been for so brief a time mistress of Stoke Rectory. The fresh-faced young curate who buried Celia's father buried her witch grandmother. He read the same service over both. If she had lived and died in the odour of sanctity, he could have done no more. The grass grows green over Nance Lake's grave in the wind-swept churchyard on the hill ; but the villagers of Stoke are still shy of passing the Pinkery pool. A report has got about that the place is haunted. When the light is low, a white face may be seen floating on the dark surface of the pool—the face that the shepherd mistook for a fleece of wool. This is how report goes. At any rate, no fisherman will drop a line into the pool, and

travellers on the moor will go a mile out of the way to avoid it.

The episode of the Princess Bordone's brief occupation of Gallantry Bower, with its disastrous *dénouement*, was not an unmixed evil. Only a few charred and blackened timbers remain to tell where the family place of the Bluetts once stood. But the proverbial ill wind was not at fault; it blew the luckless owner a splendid windfall. Whether the fire were the work of an incendiary or not, the insurance was paid without protest, and Geoffrey Bluett found himself in possession of an unlooked-for fortune.

But he did not rebuild Gallantry Bower. The bold headland still bears its romantic name, and all sorts of fanciful stories, tender and gruesome, are woven about the beautiful Princess who once rode amid the Gallantry Woods. Some smuggling is still done in the Combe, but the Revenue does not take any account of it.

Frank Carmichael did not wait for the churchwarden's threat to take effect. He left the country as soon as his father's affairs were settled. It is rumoured he is running a ranche in the Western States. He has begun afresh.

The Princess Bordone was seen no more on Exmoor. She may still be seen when the season comes round on foreign hunting grounds, and sometimes a man with a tired, jaundiced face is riding by her side. Wherever she is seen, the men all make way for her as if she were a princess indeed. They have no eyes for any other woman in the field while she is near; and the women draw their horses aside, and tighten their lips, as she rides unheeding by.

Geoffrey Bluett made way for her with the rest when he met her one day riding alone in the Bois. He was the only man in the admiring throng who took off his hat to her as she rode by, and Celia was by his side.

‘Why did you do that?’ she asked him, turning pale. She recalled the old time, and the old jealousy.

‘Why?’ he said, ‘why? Because I owe a debt to her I can never repay.’

‘A debt?’ Celia said, her brow clouding. She was thinking of that ‘wretched insurance,’ the windfall that had freed the Gallantry estate from its burden of debt.

‘No,’ he said, smiling, ‘not that. If the Princess Bordone had not come to Gallantry, Nat Snow would long ago have claimed his bride. I owe her my happiness—my love, my wife!’

THE END

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